

THE HOUSE OF
SUDDEN SLEEP

Novels by
JOHN HAWK

THE LONE LODGE MYSTERY

THE SERPENT-HEADED STICK

THE MID-OCEAN TRAGEDY

THE TITANIC HOTEL MYSTERY

IT WAS LOCKED

THE MURDER OF THE MYSTERY-WRITER

THE HOUSE OF SUDDEN SLEEP

BY
JOHN HAWK



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FIRST EDITION

FOR LAURA
IF SHE WANTS IT

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TUESDAY
OCTOBER TWENTY-THIRD

CHAPTER ONE

THE cold shower was turned on full when there came a knock at the bathroom door.

Dripping wet, Rodney Colt flung it open.

"Well . . . ?" The quiet inquiry sounded faintly amused. "I've told you, Sampson, that this room is the one inviolate place in my house, and that there is one quarter of an hour daily when I'm not to be disturbed under any circumstances. Unless, of course, that murder I'm waiting for . . ."

While he was speaking the young giant who looked more like a heavy-weight boxer than a servant, had not been listening. Sampson, as he had been nicknamed on sight by his eccentric employer, was used to these tirades. He had long ago discovered that he could find no answer, and so he wisely ceased to pay attention. But at the last word, he became suddenly taut. His small ferretlike eyes gleamed.

"But this time it is murder, Mr. Colt!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Mr. Armstrong is downstairs and he says so! And he oughter know! He says

the guy that's dead's his partner, Mr. Ribbelsdale!"

"Nonsense, Sampson! Nobody'd want to murder Ribbelsdale. And if they did, he wouldn't let 'em." His eyes narrowed and he began to rub himself vigorously with a big rough towel. "Tell Armstrong it's an unseemly hour for a joke. I'll be along directly, but I always did think Jimmy had a perverted sense of humor. . . ."

Nevertheless, Rodney Colt got into his clothes with amazing speed and in five minutes was taking the stairs three at a time in his haste to reach the dining room where his friend was waiting.

At the door he stopped short. Here was the Jimmy he knew so well. But the live-and-let-live indifference which had brought them together during the years at Harvard and kept them together ever since had disappeared. This was a strange Jimmy, with a determined, tight-closed mouth and out-thrust chin.

Colt shut his eyelids until he stared through slim slits into the troubled depths of Jimmy Armstrong's strained eyes.

"Thank God, Colt! Pulver's gone off on his annual shooting bout," Armstrong's voice was fervent, as he clasped the hand of his friend. "With you in charge something may be done. . . ."

It's damnable . . . but I tell you I'm sure old David's been done in . . ."

"Sit down, Jimmy, and have some of my coffee. I've taught Sampson how to make it so that it's palatable, and it'll do you good. Tell me, when did this all happen?"

"Last night . . . this morning . . . Oh, I don't know!" Jimmy half smiled, apologetically. "I was so damn mad at Suzanne when she said David had committed suicide, I forgot to ask for details. I hopped right off to you. I knew, Colt, that you'd listen to sense. Women . . ." Jimmy threw out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Exactly," Cold nodded slowly. "Did Mrs. Ribbelsdale tell you what made her think her husband had committed suicide? Had there been any trouble?"

"Not a damn thing! Dave and Suzanne always have been crazy about each other, and he's been getting richer each year. I tell you, Colt, Dave Ribbelsdale wasn't the sort of man to kill himself. I'd stake my life on that. He either died a natural death or he was murdered! And Suzanne said there was nothing the matter with his health as far as they knew. He had some heart disturbance, but nothing serious. She had Dr. Scofield around as soon as the body was discovered."

"Who found it, Jimmy?"

"The maid, Mabel. She went into his study to clean. That was about seven this morning . . . and there poor Dave lay dead in his chair."

"No sign of violence?"

"Not a thing. Mabel thought he was asleep at first. But she didn't quite like it, so she called to Peter, his brother-in-law, who was headed for the tennis courts, and he saw that Dave was dead. He phoned for Dr. Scofield and then told Dorcas, who was going out to play tennis with him. She told Suzanne."

"You got all this from Mrs. Ribbelsdale?"

"She phoned me right away."

"Of course. It'll make a difference to your business, won't it?"

Jimmy shrugged.

"I don't care if it does! If David *has* been murdered, I owe it to him to find the criminal. Too damn many of them are getting away these days. It's time it stopped. You've been waiting a long time for a chance like this, Colt."

"I suppose I ought to wire Pulver," murmured Colt, slowly.

"Is he where he'll see a newspaper?" interpolated Jimmy.

"Oh, no! He's way off at his shooting ranch. But I do know how to reach him if we have to."

"Well, don't. That's all I say. Don't! He may be a good District Attorney, and you may be only an amateur of the species, and a mighty poor assistant to the old man, but you'll help me find the dirty scoundrel who finished David. And you won't try to pretend it's all a natural circumstance so's to save your face with the voters if you fail."

"'Um . . . But if I take this up, Jimmy, I *shall* find the criminal."

"I wouldn't wonder if you did, at that! If a good opinion of yourself helps in such cases, you're headed for fame."

"Don't be sarcastic, Jimmy. It isn't becoming. Let's get on with the coffee, and see how we can put our gray matter to use. I take it that you are going to bring me to Ribbelsdale's. I was there to dinner once about a year ago, but I'm not exactly a friend of the family."

"Sure thing! I told Suzanne right out that it couldn't be suicide, and I was coming straight along to you. She said you were all right, but she didn't want the whole police force. She's got the children to think of."

"Delighted she approves of me. She must be a woman of rare discernment. But if it's murder she'll have to put up with the routine of the law whether she likes it or not."

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"That sounds like good old Pulver!" Jimmy grimaced. "Come now, can't we keep this to ourselves, just at first, anyhow, till we're sure?"

"You said you were sure."

"I am. But if everyone's against us, there's no use looking foolish till we have something to go on."

"Quite. I can't just imagine David Ribbelsdale letting anyone murder him. I can't, you know—unless there's a woman in it."

Jimmy shook his head decisively. "You'll have to bark up another tree, old boy! Dave never had eyes for anyone but his wife, except, of course, Dorcas."

"Miss Wilder, his sister-in-law?" Colt raised his eyebrows.

"Suzanne's only a half-sister to Dorcas and Peter, but she's been darn decent to them both. She's a decent girl, is Suzanne. I hate to think of her mixed up——"

"Perhaps it's all your imagination, Jimmy. We'd better reserve judgment until we have a talk with Dr. Scofield and a look around the house. They live over in the west end, don't they? Ellsworth Boulevard, isn't it?"

"Yes. I suggest we run along."

"Got your car?"

"Oh, no, I swam over."

"Idiot! Come on, then. No sense in wasting time. *If* there's been something queer the sooner we know it the better."

Rodney Colt slouched into his corner of the Chrysler roadster and was silent while they drove through the noisy, awakening streets of Dartford.

All his life, except for the years spent at Groton and Harvard, he had lived in the huge house which his paternal grandfather had built after some lucky breaks in winning. His mother had died when he was born and his father, a dilettante and waster, had survived her by only three years. But during those three years, he had made such a merry mess of the family fortunes as to force his son to go to work.

Rodney went to law school at Yale and qualified the same year as a practicing lawyer in Connecticut, his home state. He set himself about the sordid business of earning a living, and with a quickness which surprised himself as much as anyone, found himself an Assistant District Attorney at thirty-five. He got on with Pulver, and when the older man went on his annual shooting holiday, he always left Colt in charge, with the understanding that if anything extraordinary happened, he was to be recalled. But nothing ever occurred in the law-abiding city of Dartford.

While Chicago set the world agog with her

murders, and Philadelphia reeked with political corruption, and New York vaunted her more catholic tastes in crime, Dartford went on its virtuous way. And Rodney Colt only had two weeks a year which were his own. He had given up hope of ever getting a chance to display what he called, sardonically, his hidden talents.

But this time he was not thinking of himself. He was thinking of the dead man whom he had known rather intimately at the League Club, although he had only been to his home once. That was on the occasion of the dinner the year before. Judging by their respective years of college graduation he made out that David Ribbelsdale was about ten years older than himself. Ribbelsdale had been looking older lately. The hair on his temples had turned gray and fine lines were multiplying around the sensitive black eyes. He was a handsome man; proud, withdrawn, cold, but with a hidden fire beneath his reserve. Colt had seen it flare up on one or two occasions when they had played poker together. He recalled it now. No one would cross David Ribbelsdale with impunity. Had there been a quarrel . . . a quarrel which had ended in his mysterious death?

There were two children. David had been a good father, and his friends at the League Club had heard a lot about the phenomenal David Jr.

who must be some three years old. There had been another baby about six months ago, a girl. Altogether David Ribbelsdale was the envy of many lesser men—and now he was dead. It was fantastic. From the first, Colt had been inclined to agree with Jimmy's theory of foul play. If Dr. Scofield refused to give a certificate a post mortem would inevitably follow, and the Detective Division notified. But the next step was obviously a talk with the family doctor.

"Scofield will be at the house, I imagine?" he asked Jimmy as they approached Ellsworth Boulevard.

"Sure to be. He's a great friend of old Mrs. Ribbelsdale. Almost forgot to tell you Dave's mother's been living with them since his father died last year."

"Oh. No trouble between her and young Mrs. Ribblesdale?"

"Not a bit. And no reason for killing Dave, if there was. Barking up the wrong tree again, old man!"

"Perhaps you'll tell me who did kill your friend," suggested Colt, ironically. "You seem to know all about it."

"That's the boy!" drawled Jimmy with a delighted grin, as he swung the roadster round the corner into Museum Street. "There's the house,

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up on that knoll," he continued, waving an arm toward a large American version of a Georgian mansion, which peeped through the autumn leaves. "They have the best locality out here; nine acres with frontage on three streets. I'm going up the back drive." He turned the corner into Ellsworth Boulevard and immediately turned again into the rising driveway which led to the red brick home of the Ribbelsdales. The house which was to be known as the House of Sudden Sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

IF POLITICIANS fought shy of Rodney Colt and suspected his party loyalty because he was an exceptionally good violinist and an authority of sorts on such subjects as Chinese ceramics and French symbolist poetry his own circle gave him a no less grudging welcome. So, although a most eligible bachelor if it had not been for the political taint, he had only once been inside Suzanne Ribbelsdale's home. Suzanne was undoubtedly the most popular of the young matrons of Dartford. She wasn't a snob nor a prude, but, as she would have put it, she knew where to draw the line. And apparently the line was drawn between her and her intimates, and Rodney Colt. With a sardonic smile playing about his lips he got out of the car under the porte-cochère.

To his left, in front of the garage entrance, stood two cars; a magnificent bright green Isotta-Frascini limousine and a canary yellow Rolls-Royce sports model.

"Your Suzanne has expensive tastes, I observe," said Colt.

"The Rolls is, or was, David's. He must have driven up from New York in it last night. Last night—and now he's dead."

"Just so. And you and I, Jimmy, are going to find out who killed him," said Colt, quietly.

"You agree with me then that it's . . ."

"Probably murder," finished Colt, under his breath, just as the maid opened the door to them.

"We want to see Mrs. Ribbelsdale. She's expecting us," said Jimmy, as they entered. "Tell her it's Mr. Colt and Mr. Armstrong."

"Yes, Mr. Armstrong." As the girl disappeared up the stairs, Colt caught Jimmy's arm. "Quick, before we meet any of the family, I want to see where the body was found. Show me!"

They were standing at the broad arched entrance to the dining room, and Jimmy hurried the young Assistant District Attorney through the long paneled room to the music room where a grand piano faced them. Jimmy continued into the enclosed sun porch which was the only inside entrance to David Ribbelsdale's private study. But Colt had stopped and was staring at the piano with a curious interest.

"Come along, Colt. Suzanne will be here in a minute," whispered Jimmy, but Colt continued to stare with puzzled concentration. Finally he approached and looked closely at its polished sur-

face. He opened his mouth to speak, when the sound of approaching footsteps caused him to draw hastily away and walk toward Jimmy, saying in a normal voice, "Perhaps we'd better wait for Mrs. Ribbelsdale before going in there, Jimmy."

"Here I am," a voice interposed. "And here is David's mother, too."

Suzanne Ribbelsdale was thirty-one, but she looked rather younger, thanks perhaps to the exceptional clearness of her deep blue eyes and the natural wave of her shingled blonde hair. Her eyes struck Colt as the bluest he had ever seen. He remembered noticing them on their one previous meeting. But then her cheeks had been flushed, her manner vivacious; now she was pale and had a certain shocked, hurt expression that went straight to Colt's heart. Deep down, Rodney Colt was almost a sentimentalist.

He took her hand gently.

"You know how deeply everyone sympathizes with you," he said. Then he turned to the older woman who had been standing quietly by the door.

"And with you, Mrs. Ribbelsdale," he continued, taking the slender blue-veined hand in his. He was startled by the coldness in the frail fingers, and raised his eyes to find the tall old lady staring at him intently.

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Mrs. Edith Ribbelsdale, David's mother, was seventy years old. Her hair, which was white but still curly, was becomingly arranged in a low knot on her neck. She was thin and her pale skin hung in tiny wave like folds about the bones of her face. Only the black eyes, so like her son's, were bright and alive. But for those eyes she might have been a piece of marble. Her daughter-in-law turned to her.

"Shall we go in with them?" Suzanne asked softly.

Mrs. Ribbelsdale did not seem to hear. She was still staring at Colt.

Finally her pale lips opened.

"You have come about my son?"

"At Mrs. Ribbelsdale's request, I believe," explained Colt taken aback by the cold hostility of her voice. "We want to help. It's only fair to your son, that his name should be cleared of any suspicion of cowardice, which is what people call suicide."

"Suicide? Cowardice? But I know that my son was no coward! He was a braver man than you will ever know." The old voice was firm and the trembling hand was stilled with a pressure at her side.

"Is Dr. Scofield about?" asked Jimmy, casually, trying to break the tension.

"He was called out on a confinement case about ten minutes ago," replied Suzanne, "but I promised to ask Mr. Colt to wait until he returned. He said he would try to be back in an hour."

Colt nodded.

"I hope Jimmy's apprehension proves to be unfounded and that the doctor will see his way to signing a death certificate."

"My son did not die from natural causes. He died of a broken heart." The white head was bowed, and she swayed and would have fallen had not Colt supported her.

"Come, Mother Ribbelsdale," said Suzanne, with more decision than she had yet shown. "We mustn't give way. Control yourself, dear. You shouldn't have tried to come down."

"I'm all right. Let me sit here. Here in this room where my boy used to play to me." The tall gaunt figure was trembling uncontrollably, as Colt helped her to a chair.

"She ought to have a stimulant," Colt said to Jimmy. "Can't you get her something and look after her, while Mrs. David and I have a little chat?"

"Of course." Jimmy took his cue promptly. "You two go on. I'll wait here. We'll be all right, won't we, Mrs. Ribbelsdale?"

Colt did not hear any reply as he followed

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Suzanne through the sun room and turned back to the study, a continuation of the music room which was partitioned off for privacy.

He paused at the entrance to ask: "Is this a private entrance to Mr. Ribbelsdale's study?" He pointed to the double French doors which led from the sun room to a crazy pavement path which he could see ran to the driveway.

"Yes. David used to come in this way often." Her voice broke, and her lower lip trembled.

"This is very trying for you, I know," said Colt, sympathetically. He motioned Suzanne to a chair near the door and sat down opposite her, instinctively avoiding a large leather armchair which stood before the heavy mahogany desk. Although the body had been removed to the bed-room he imagined that this was the chair in which the man had died.

The room was small but comfortably furnished. A mannish room. The heavy chairs were upholstered in brown leather, the curtains were deep red velvet, and the single rug which covered the polished floor was a Bokhara. The walls were covered with brown grass-cloth and only two pictures hung on them; one, a portrait of his mother by Sargent, the other a very recent painting of his two children with their mother. On the desk was

a photograph of a lovely young girl of about twenty who Colt found out later to be Dorcas Wilder. "I will be as brief as possible," he began gently, when they were seated. "Tell me just what *you* know, not what the others have told you. I'll get their stories from them direct. First, what did your mother-in-law mean by 'a broken heart'?"

Suzanne flushed suddenly, and as suddenly became pale. There was an appeal for understanding in the hurt eyes she raised to Rodney Colt.

"It doesn't seem fair to David to tell even you," she began hesitatingly. "It's just an older woman's foolish imagination. Nothing more, I assure you. She believes that he no longer cared for me—that he cared for someone else, and that his honor wouldn't let him admit it. But it isn't true. I assure you it isn't. And it seems a shame when David's dead that he should be maligned. He can't answer it now."

"You can count on my discretion, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. Unless it's imperative to prevent a miscarriage of justice, I'll respect your reticence. Now to get down to business. Jimmy is convinced that your husband was murdered. What has Dr. Scofield said?"

"He will tell you himself. He only told me that he felt confident that David did not die from

natural causes, though he has nothing to base it on. He wants an autopsy—is that the word?—performed.”

“That means the police and all the rest of it, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. If Dr. Scofield refuses a certificate, there’s no way to avoid publicity. Though with the presidential election only two weeks off, you can count on a minimum of that.”

“You are kind. I didn’t know. You won’t let my little David hear of it, will you? The children must never feel there is a mystery about their father. They loved him so.”

“Certainly not. Except for the formality of the investigation, the police won’t trouble you, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. Your home life can go on as before. But now tell me what happened here last night.”

“Last night?” Suzanne raised wide eyes.

“Yes, last night, when Mr. Ribbelsdale returned from New York. Jimmy said he had been down there on business.”

“He had. And no one expected him home until to-day. I went to bed unusually early as I’d been to a dance the night before, and Dorcas came up with me. Peter and grandmother Edith stayed down for a final game of chess, but I was still talking with Dorcas when I heard them come up.”

“What time was that?”

"About ten o'clock. I can't say exactly. Perhaps one of the others will know."

"And what time did Mr. Ribbelsdale return?"

"We none of us know. We none of us heard him. I've asked everyone. But Dr. Scofield said, when he saw David, that he'd been dead only about five or six hours." Suzanne swallowed with difficulty and tried to go on. She had crumpled her handkerchief into a tiny ball.

"You think he took his own life?"

"Oh, Mr. Colt, I don't know what to think! I'm wretched. Yesterday I was the happiest woman in Dartford, and to-day—" She reached over and put her hand on Colt's knee. "Help me, I beg of you, Mr. Colt, help me! Whatever comes of it, I will be brave and face it. Anything is better than these last two hours. Why Mother Ribbelsdale suspects us all, my brother and sister and me, I'm sure, and we can't make her out, and the servants will be leaving, and I don't know what will come of it! I'm completely in the dark. Why David should have returned so late and why he should have died, I don't know. I don't blame anyone. But I want the truth!" With the last word she raised her head and looked full at Colt, with tear-filled eyes.

"You think there was something then." Colt watched her narrowly, as she replied.

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"I think there is something I don't understand, and that you can help me," she said, simply. "And I ask you for David's sake to do your best."

"I shall. And on your part you will promise me that you will tell me the whole truth, and help me all you can?"

"Indeed, I will."

"Then tell me—what woman do you suspect of having your husband's love?" Colt's question came quick as a flash.

"I don't know what you mean." Suzanne was obviously confused.

Colt shrugged his shoulders. "If you and your mother-in-law mean to persist in your secrecy, it will hamper me, I admit, but it won't keep me from reaching a solution."

While he was speaking, Colt detected light footsteps approaching. A girl of about twenty-one or two appeared in the door-way. She was tall and slender. Her light brown hair, which was very straight and thick, was coiled in large knots over each ear. Her amber eyes, of a curious color and brilliancy, were gazing searchingly at him from under thick dark curling lashes. He knew at once that it was Dorcas Wilder, Suzanne's half-sister.

"Where is Jimmy?" she asked in a sweet husky voice. "And who is this?" gesturing toward Colt.

"This is Rodney Colt, the Assistant District

Attorney. Mr. Colt, my sister, Miss Wilder."

Rodney rose, and smilingly took the extended hand. "Jimmy has often spoken of you," he said.

Suddenly he became aware that Dorcas Wilder was not paying any attention to him. Her eyes were riveted on the photograph which he had earlier observed standing on the littered surface of the large desk.

"How did that come here?" Dorcas asked in a hoarse whisper.

Suzanne and Colt turned simultaneously.

"I haven't an idea, dear. *I* certainly didn't put it there." Suzanne smiled, but with almost uncanny intuition Colt felt hidden claws. Could Dorcas Wilder be the girl to whom Mrs. Edith Ribbelsdale had referred?

"No matter"—he felt that Dorcas was speaking with forced lightness. "It's Jimmy I want."

"Go with her, Mrs. Ribbelsdale, and help her unearth our friend," said Colt. "You've told me all you can for the present. I want to talk to Mabel and then to your brother."

"Peter?" It was Dorcas who spoke. "You mustn't talk to Peter, Mr. Colt . . . please."

"Why, what is the matter?" Colt spoke sharply, for Dorcas had swayed and caught hold of the door casing.

"It's nothing . . . nothing whatever," she lied

valiantly. "We're all upset this morning. You mustn't mind what we do or say."

"Poor dear," Suzanne bent caressingly toward her young sister, as she rose to her feet. "Come on and we will find Jimmy."

"I shall want you where I can find you both," called Colt after them, as he again threw himself into a chair. "Whew! . . . What a bunch of neurotics!" he exclaimed to himself. "They all act as if they were afraid of something. Now what in the devil can they be afraid of? That's what I've got to find out first. There's some sort of a shadow hanging over this house, something secret, and everyone of them either suspects or knows what it is. Yet," he went on, "I'd be willing to bet my bottom dollar that they won't tell. These families always believe in keeping the skeleton locked tight in the proverbial cupboard. And how am I, green as I am, ever going to find the key to that cupboard? No, I guess I'd better get down off my high horse and call in Inspector Flynn and the rest of the expert gang. They may be stupid, but I'm likely to be worse."

As he was thus arguing with himself, light footsteps again became audible, and the maid who had admitted them appeared.

"You wanted me, sir?"

"Just a few words, Mabel. Don't be alarmed."

"I will gladly tell you everything I know. Is it true that Mr. Ribbelsdale was murdered?" Her voice was fraught with excitement as she asked the question.

"That is what we want to find out. Now tell me what you found when you came in here this morning."

"I came in to dust—as I always do at seven, so as to have the room cleaned before Mr. Ribbelsdale comes down and he was sitting in that chair there, sir, right before his own desk, and kind of slouched down like he was asleep."

"He looked calm and peaceful, as in sleep?"

"Just exactly like as if he was asleep," Mabel repeated with conviction. "You never would have thought he was dead."

"Then how did you come to suspect it?"

"I didn't—exactly." She paused, confused.

"What do you mean? You called young Mr. Wilder, didn't you?" Colt watched her face which revealed so clearly each passing thought.

"Yes, sir. I thought we ought to help him upstairs. I thought——"

"Oh, I understand. You think I'm a policeman and would lock you all up if I knew you had liquor in the house? I'm not interested in prohibition, I assure you. What I want is the truth."

"It is true, sir. It was Mr. Peter who said he

was dead. I was that scared. I didn't rightly know what to do. I'm not used to dead persons."

"To be sure. One doesn't usually find them lying about the house, does one?" Colt smiled. "Now tell me when Mr. Peter found that his brother-in-law was dead, what did he do?"

"I'll tell you myself what I did!" broke in an angry voice from the sun room. "You don't need to snoop around and quiz the servants about our private affairs! We——"

"Ah, here is Mr. Peter himself," interposed Colt, suavely. "You run along about your work, Mabel. Mr. Wilder says he'll tell me everything I want to know."

Peter Wilder stood back to allow the maid to go. His fine young features were immobile, and the pallor of his skin was so intense as to give the illusion of sculpture. He was tall and thin. His pale brown hair was long and straight and a thick lock hung over his left eye almost obscuring it. His gray-green eyes had a peculiar brilliancy, and though wide open, never appeared to be looking directly at anyone.

"Sit down, won't you?" Colt indicated the chair Suzanne had vacated.

"I . . . Say, who do you think you are? There's no call for interference just because a man of David's age dies. There may be a hun-

dred physical reasons." Peter spoke awkwardly.

"Please sit down," persisted Colt gently. "I'm not intruding. I was asked to come here by your sister."

"My sister?"

"Yes, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. She and Mr. Armstrong feel that the death of Mr. Ribbelsdale is rather mysterious."

"Mysterious?" Peter looked much younger than his eighteen years, and much more like a puzzled little boy than the determined young man who had angrily addressed Colt from the sun room.

"It is quite natural, in the circumstances, isn't it, Mr. Wilder?" the Assistant District Attorney said, in a reassuring voice. "Mr. Ribbelsdale was too healthy a man to die so suddenly from natural causes. I understand Dr. Scofield admits that."

"Have you seen Dr. Scofield?" Peter interrupted in a breathless manner.

"Not yet. But he is expected to come back soon, Mrs. Ribbelsdale, your sister, tells me. We all feel that death may have been due to an unnatural cause, and that it should be investigated."

"I'm the first person in the house, except Mabel, who admits having seen David since his return," Peter spoke defiantly. He closed his long thin fingers and brought his fist down on the arm of

his chair with a dull thud. "But that doesn't mean I'm the only person who did see him. It means I'm the only one who dares to tell the truth."

"What do you mean by 'the truth'?" Colt asked, slowly and deliberately.

For quite two minutes neither man spoke. Peter sat taut and still. Then, to Colt's amazement, the boy buried his head in his arms and burst into tears.

So this was the happy family Jimmy Armstrong had described to him! Every one of them nursing a secret hate or fear and all of them keyed up to the breaking point. What the devil was there about this house that made one feel that way? Colt was aware of a subtle uncertainty entering his own veins. Something with which he did not know how to cope; something too indefinite, too unformed.

When the outward show of misery was spent and Peter lay quietly with his head still buried in his arms, Colt rose and stood at his side, putting a hand on the bowed shoulder.

"I'm not going to try to force you to tell me, Peter," he said, very kindly. "But when you feel you want to help, when the secret becomes too hard to hide any longer, come to me. I will be waiting. You know where I can be found."

There was no word, no movement to indicate

that the boy had heard, but Colt seemed satisfied. He picked up his hat and walked quietly back through the sun room into the music room. From there he looked into the dining room and saw Mabel setting the table. He beckoned to her.

"I want you to think very carefully, Mabel," he said in a guarded voice, as he drew her towards the piano. "Have you dusted here this morning?"

"Oh, no, sir . . . I've been too upset."

"Quite. Now think. When did you last dust here, and did you use a dry cloth?"

Mabel puckered up her forehead in an effort to concentrate. Then slowly an expression of pleased discovery passed over her face.

"I remember perfectly, sir. Yesterday was Monday. Every Monday I go over the whole piano with an oiled chamois to keep the wood work nicely polished, you know."

"Ah," Colt sighed ecstatically. "Then how came this dull blur?" He indicated a spot on the flat surface near the door leading to the sun room.

"I'm sure I don't know, sir. It wasn't there yesterday. I closed the piano myself about nine o'clock."

Mabel bent closer and eyed the spot with increasing interest. "It looks as if something had been spilled there and wiped up with a handkerchief or towel, sir."

"You're a smart girl, Mabel," Colt commented gleefully. "Promise me not to mention this to anyone in the house. *Anyone*. It must be our secret, for the present."

"Oh, yes, sir," she hesitated. "Do you think Mr. Ribbelsdale did it himself, sir?" she asked in an awed whisper.

"I don't know . . . I don't know . . ." Colt stared perplexedly into space.

Suddenly he straightened. "But I'm going to find out," he asserted determinedly. "Run along now, Mabel. We don't want to be caught again by Mr. Peter." He smiled and the girl smiled confidently back at him as she returned to her table work. She was no longer in awe of him.

The telephone was ringing somewhere in the distance. A door opened nearby, and Colt distinguished a new voice among others which rose apparently in greeting. He walked to the entrance of the drawing-room and looked down its length. At the end, by the wide arched opening into the entrance hall, he saw Suzanne and Dorcas and Jimmy standing with a meticulously groomed man somewhat past middle age, with a large head almost bald and a prominent nose. The black satchel in his hand assured Colt that his surmise was correct. Here was Dr. Scofield at last. He advanced expectantly to meet him.

CHAPTER THREE

AT ONE time Dartford was considered the largest city in Connecticut; during the war Bridgeport claimed the dubious honor; later New Haven aspired to the laurels. But if first place in population was doomed to remain a moot question, the glory of being the literary and artistic center of the State, as well as the most beautiful city, was beyond dispute. And of all ardent Dartfordites, Dr. Scofield was the most ardent, desiring the fame of his city before his own.

Sixty years previously he had been born in an old-fashioned house in Asylum Avenue. He had been educated in the public schools and at Trinity College. He had risen among his own people. He had never married, and recent rumor had it that in his early manhood he had loved a woman ten years his senior; loved her loyally though she did not return his affection. Rodney Colt had heard it said that the woman of Dr. Scofield's one romance was Mrs. Edith Ribbelsdale.

As Colt walked the length of the spacious drawing-room he glanced out through the windows at

the green sloping lawns and spreading oak trees. On the other side of Ellsworth Boulevard he could glimpse a well-kept home similar to the one he was now in. The length of the boulevard to the entrance of Elizabeth Park was lined on either side with similar places, homes of the wealthier citizens of Dartford. It seemed incongruous that such a hint of tragedy should disturb the even tenor of their lives. Yet here it was, stalking stark and fearful in broad daylight through this red brick house on its flower-strewn knoll.

At any other time the irony of it would have been uppermost in Colt's mind. But he had been touched by Suzanne Ribbelsdale's appeal. The helplessness of her young half-brother had penetrated his Harvard reserve. He had to learn the truth and raise the cloud from the charming home into which he had been called.

After the formalities of the introduction, Colt turned to the elder man with a disarming air of deference.

"If you'd forgive the liberty, Dr. Scofield," he said, "I should very much like to have a private talk with you at once."

"Certainly," acquiesced the other. "It is my earnest desire to speak with you before you take any public measures. I believe I am right in

thinking that the knowledge of any peculiarity in the death of Mr. Ribbelsdale has so far been confined to us here?" His penetrating gaze swept the others.

"I have told no one," volunteered Suzanne, keeping her voice steady with an effort.

"That is as I wished. You will wait for Mr. Colt and me. I think it best that we talk in the study. I shall have to explain many details to him and it will be easier there."

Colt bowed and led the way; the doctor, bag still in hand, followed him.

When they were in the study, Dr. Scofield closed the door leading to the sun room, and, to Colt's astonishment, locked it.

"I'm not going to tell you why I take that precaution. I didn't ask you in here to volunteer information, but to ask a favor of you."

"A favor—*of me?*"

"Yes, of you, Mr. Colt. It so happened that you have the power to wreck the happiness of many persons. It may be your duty to do this. But I am here to ask you not to be precipitate. I ask you to wait. If a crime has been committed the delay of a day won't, in this case, make much difference; if, when we have examined the body we find no trace of poison, a scandal may have

been averted, a scandal which will touch the innocent as well as the guilty." He spoke very earnestly.

"You use the word 'guilty,' Dr. Scofield," retorted Colt. "You do not think Mr. Ribbelsdale died a natural death."

"To be frank with you, I'm puzzled. In the thirty-four years I've practiced in Dartford I have never before made the request I make of you to-day. And it is because I *am* puzzled. Mr. Ribbelsdale has been my patient. I have treated him for valvular disease of the heart. There is nothing about the corpse to tell me absolutely that he did not die of this disease. I did not expect it, but I am not infallible. My judgment may have been at fault."

"But you must know that what you ask is impossible!" exclaimed Colt.

"It is not impossible. You are in a position to do as you think best—best for everybody. If you insist, I will ask Dr. Dayton the regular Medical Examiner to perform an autopsy with me, in a friendly way, and not as if it were a suspect case. I want to be aboveboard in this, Mr. Colt, but I do not want an injustice done." He went to the window and drew back the curtain. Colt saw in the garden a petite foreign-looking girl playing with a sturdy boy of about three. Nearby stood

a perambulator in which a recumbent infant could be seen solemnly playing with its bare toes. It was almost like a prearranged play, Colt was musing, as the doctor turned to him.

"You see—there are children. I brought them into the world. For their sake——"

Colt shrugged. "I agree," he said succinctly.

The doctor took his hand in a fervent grip.

"You'll never regret it, I promise you. You'll never regret it."

"Il faut laver son linge sale en famille, eh, what?"

Dr. Scofield turned on the Assistant District Attorney and retorted severely, "Mr. Colt, after all, Mr. Ribbelsdale is dead!"

"Thank you, Dr. Scofield," replied Colt. "Sage guess, mine," he added, *sotto voce*.

Instead of displaying anger, the doctor appeared indifferent to Colt's flippancy. He was frowning, in deep thought.

"We must use tact and discretion, tact—and—discretion, Mr. Colt," he said. "If there's been a murder—and I pray to God, I am wrong in my suspicions—we'll know to-morrow at this time. Until then . . ."

"I gather you have no objection to my questioning the servants, and Miss Wilder," Colt remarked. "I want to establish the time of Mr. Ribbelsdale's

return if I can. It seems impossible that if he drove up in that Rolls I saw in the yard that no one in the house should have known it. And what was he doing in his study here? Why hadn't he gone upstairs? There's something queer about it, doctor. I feel it in my bones."

"You're new at this sort of thing, Colt," said the older man with just a touch of patronage. "When you're as old as I am, my boy, you'll know that there are few lives that will stand the glare of the searchlight."

"So you, too, think that Ribbelsdale was carrying on something he didn't want known," challenged Colt.

"I know David Ribbelsdale had something on his conscience that was eating his very life away. Several times I thought he would confide in me, but he didn't. More than that I cannot tell you."

"And you think his mother and wife knew nothing of this?"

"That I cannot say. I only tell you what I *know*, Mr. Colt, not what I *think*."

"Well, I only wish someone would be entirely frank with me," muttered Colt, irritably. With his hands deep in his trouser pockets, he rose abruptly and unlocked the door. He flung it open and confronted Mrs. Edith Ribbelsdale.

"I *thought* I heard someone," he said.

"I had to know what you were doing here. I did not know Dr. Scofield had returned. I cannot allow you to spy on my dead son." The black eyes sparkled defiantly.

Colt felt irritated anew. They all seemed intent on putting him on the defensive. He walked over to the desk and began sorting the papers. He hadn't intended to continue his investigation at this point, but the manner of the white-haired woman annoyed him beyond endurance. He felt, suddenly, that this was his chance and that he was bungling it. He determined to bring something to light before he left the house.

Suzanne Ribbelsdale had joined her mother-in-law, and Colt turned to her.

"It is imperative that I should go carefully through everything in this room," he said, coldly. "Have I your permission?"

"Of course," she assented at once. "Let me help you."

"You would let a stranger go through David's papers, you, his wife?" the elder woman's voice was accusing. Suzanne extended both her hands in a helpless gesture, and shrugged her shoulders. She was dressed all in black and looked very appealing in her bereavement.

"Don't be foolish, Mother," she said, patiently. "Mr. Colt is only doing his duty."

"His duty!" the pale lips curled scornfully. "I wouldn't allow him to remain under my roof!"

"*J'y suis, j'y reste!*" Colt lifted his eyebrows and smiled mockingly. This determined old woman might have the air of a tragedy queen, but he didn't intend to be influenced by it. He'd given his word to the doctor not to call in outside aid for twenty-four hours, but in the meantime he would leave no stone unturned to discover what he could for himself. It was his right. He reached for the top drawer of the desk and opened it. It contained only a few stamps and stamped envelopes. He opened the others with little better success. There was an address book, some extra pencils, a child's toy. Apparently Ribbelsdale did not transact business from his home. Yet it had become increasingly distasteful to Colt to be forced to admit that he was beaten.

Suddenly he turned on the watching woman.

"There is a secret drawer to this desk. Where is it?"

He had made a thrust in the dark, but the reaction was instantaneous.

"How dare you say such a thing? How dare you insinuate that my son had anything to hide? How——"

"Mother, please." Suzanne's voice was strained and she bit her lip nervously. "*Please——*"

"And *you* are David's wife!"

Colt felt embarrassed at the contempt in the old voice. His social consciousness was so much more deeply ingrained than his newly acquired professionalism, that his one thought was to relieve the tension of the moment. He turned to Suzanne.

"Let's tap the desk, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. You help me, he began by thumping at one side. He hoped no one would realize how inept he was at this sort of thing. But no one seemed to notice. Suzanne entered into the game, for game it was, with evident relief. The doctor went over to Edith Ribbelsdale and supported her by the arm. Two pairs of eyes never left Colt and Suzanne as they went on with their futile tappings.

"Let's try here," Suzanne suggested, reaching for one side at the top.

Colt obediently thumped, thumped, in that region.

"Nothing here!" Just as he spoke, his finger came in contact with a protruding board, and unconsciously he pushed. As if by magic, out flew a low thin drawer filled with what at first sight seemed to be old letters.

Suzanne drew back, with an expression of consternation. No one spoke a word. If Colt was embarrassed before, it was nothing to the way he

felt at that moment. With a wave of revulsion, he turned away, without touching the letters.

It was Jimmy Armstrong who came to the rescue. He had been watching the little drama, unnoticed in the background.

"David had nothing to hide, I am sure. If those are his letters, he would want us to read them. They may be just the clue we lack." He walked firmly to the drawer and possessed himself of the contents. "If no one else will read them, I propose reading them aloud to you all."

"Oh, Jimmy, don't," wailed Suzanne.

David's mother turned on her savagely: "You knew those letters were there; you led Mr. Colt to them, and now you pretend to be abashed! Little hypocrite!"

"Come, come!" interposed Dr. Scofield with gentle firmness. "Sit down here, Edith. There can be nothing your son would want to hide from us who are here." He led her to a divan in a corner of the sun room. The others gathered around Jimmy who held six or seven letters in his hand. It was obvious that they were all addressed in the same handwriting, obvious, too, that it was a feminine hand, and they were all written in a curious lavender ink.

"They are all addressed to David and all post-

marked New York," he said, inspecting the envelopes.

Colt held out his hand for one and examined it. The paper was a heavy rough finished cream-color, and the envelopes were marked "Tiffany, New York." They could be traced, if necessary, he decided. He drew the paper from the envelope. Across one corner was engraved in neat script the word "CYNTHIA," in pale lavender ink which exactly matched the ink in which the letters were written.

"You had better begin with the first," Colt suggested to Jimmy, while he sat back to listen.

"That seems to be two years old. The first was posted on September 23, 1926, and the last only six days ago, on October 17, 1928. These other five are more or less regularly interspersed between." He turned to Suzanne, who had been joined by her younger brother and sister. "You are sure that you want me to read them?" he asked.

She nodded, unable to speak. Her eyes were misty with unshed tears.

"'Dearest,' " he began in a low voice.
" 'I'm counting the hours until I shall again lie in your arms, again feel your dear warm breath on my face. Dave,

what would I have done if you had not come into my life when you did, if you had not saved me from myself? I shall always worship you for your sweet understanding.

"I have cut my hair, because you said you'd love it that way. I'd sacrifice more than my curly red locks to please you. Oh, Dave, *I adore you.*

" 'CYNTHIA.' "

Jimmy paused and cleared his throat. No one spoke a word. He took up the next letter. "This is dated November of the same year," he said, and read:

"Beloved, never have I spent such ecstatic hours as those last week. It is like a dream, a wild, mad dream . . . but so wonderful! My own Dave . . .

"The slippers you sent me fit exactly. How did you know that I wear a four-and-a-half C? I'd hoped you'd think my foot was smaller. You dear, you dear! You are too generous. And I love you too much! A thousand kisses to last you till we meet again.

" 'CYNTHIA.' "

"It is not necessary to go on," broke in Colt. "There is little to be gained by harrowing Mrs. Ribbelsdale with these old letters."

"Yes, please, stop, please!" panted Suzanne. Then quickly controlling herself, she said huskily: "But go on, if you must. I can stand it, if it will help David."

Her agitation was pitiful. It was apparent that she wanted to hear—and yet couldn't bear to hear.

"Yes, let us hear the last one," said the doctor. "That should be more relevant."

"David, David, Where is my *gallant homme*? You cannot mean what your wicked letter says. You cannot mean that you are coming to say good-by. Where are all your promises, all your protests? Are they to be sacrificed to an old woman? Because your mother has come to live with you must I, Cynthia, young, passionate, and beautiful, be cast aside? *Never!* I warn you, beloved of my soul, that I shall not let you go! Better that we die, than part and live! Better . . . But I cannot write. I am distracted . . . My Irish mother and my Polish father return from the dead to jeer at me, at me their daughter who cannot keep her lover! Oh, David, be not so cruel. I cannot bear it! David mio, no other woman shall have you if I can't, no, not even your mother . . . Your grief-stricken, CYNTHIA."

The atmosphere became more and more strained and intense as Jimmy proceeded with the letter. At the end, Peter jumped to his feet, his eyes gleaming with relief and excitement.

"That explains everything!" he exclaimed, joyfully. "It's Cynthia who killed David. When we find her we will be at the end of this horror which is hanging over us!"

"Perhaps you'll explain how a woman in New York can murder a lover, granting that he was her lover, in Dartford, Mr. Wilder," said Colt. "Of course, there may be some abracadabra known to these red-haired Irish-Poles, by which poison can be delayed until a man drives home and relaxes in his own study . . . but I'm afraid I don't know of any—do *you*, Dr. Scofield?"

Colt turned to the doctor, as he put the question to him.

Dr. Scofield drew himself up and for the briefest instant hesitated. But that instant was enough for Colt. It had answered his question.

"It's ridiculous, of course," the doctor recovered himself suavely. "If I hadn't seen the letters myself I shouldn't have believed in them. It's all so unlike my idea of David Ribbelsdale."

"You are right, doctor," assented the dead man's mother, appreciative of his loyalty. "There is something queer about those letters. I don't say

they weren't written to David. The evidence is too clear. But something puzzles me. May I look at one of them?" She extended her hand to Colt who had possessed himself of the tiny packet.

"Certainly," Colt replied, blandly, as he selected one at random and held it out to her.

For some minutes she studied it in silence. Then she raised her eyes, and Colt saw that they had become less antagonistic.

"There's something strange," she repeated. "I shall be able to tell what it is later . . . but I can't quite put my finger on it now."

Colt's eyes had unconsciously strayed to Dorcas Wilder who was sitting in a corner of the room. He intercepted a glance which was passing between her and Jimmy Armstrong. This glance was to trouble him greatly in the ensuing days.

When he turned again towards Suzanne Ribelsdale, he saw that she too was puzzling over the intimacy in those amber eyes as they looked into Jimmy's brown ones. Her forehead wrinkled, and her eyes were half-closed, as if in physical pain. Colt felt sympathetic. Suzanne had been through such an ordeal in the last half hour as would crush any woman. Not only death but unfaithfulness had come to her in one short morning.

He determined to trace Cynthia.

Rodney Colt took a brief farewell. As he

climbed in beside Jimmy in the roadster, his mouth was set in a grim line.

"Well," drawled Jimmy, as he turned the car from the private driveway into Ellsworth Boulevard. "What do you think, Rodney?"

"I'm wondering why you were so sure it was murder, Jimmy," replied Colt, enigmatically.

CHAPTER FOUR

THAT evening at the League Club, where Jimmy Armstrong lived, he and Assistant District Attorney Colt sat long over their after-dinner coffee. During the meal they had discussed divers subjects, but concentrated principally on the election.

"Smith hasn't the ghost of a chance now that he's come out frankly against prohibition," remarked Colt, lighting a thin Havana cigar. "With the anti-Catholic south nailing down the lid as fast as they can, that outspokenness of his will put in the last nail. Mark my words, Jimmy, tergiversation is a hundred percent ahead of——"

"I'm voting for Smith," interrupted Jimmy, briefly, with a twinkle in his eyes, "and I bet every good Republican in little old Connecticut will do the same."

"Scandalous . . . sedition in our midst! Even if you are, James, my son, you should hide your light under a bushel. Such exposure savours of the bourgeoisie."

Jimmy grinned. "Any sort of gab as long as

the subject we're both thinking of is avoided, eh?"

Rodney Colt shrugged, deprecatingly.

"If you were to dig into my doubtful subconscious, Jimmy," he said, teasingly, "you'd find that I'm growing a crop of spiked complexes against the delightful lady who killed David Ribbelsdale." He lowered his voice as he pronounced the name, but as no one was paying the slightest attention, he continued ruefully:

"Whoever murdered our friend, Jimmy, was a singularly ungracious wretch—nary a fingerprint, footprint, lost button or misplaced glove. Damn neat fellow, don't you know? All the paraphernalia for detection simply lacking. No chance to produce the mystic powder, like the conjurer's rabbit from the hat, and *presto!* amaze the breathless spectators as the telltale contour of the finger appears when I blow away the powder. It's always like that in books. I feel cheated, Jimmy."

"I suppose you examined the entire house with a microscope," offered Jimmy, facetiously.

"Not only the house but the insides of all the heads, don't you know." Colt cleared his throat, affectedly. "You'd be amazed, Jimmy, if I told you some of my discoveries—but I shan't, never fear! I doubt your discretion, Jimmy."

Jimmy grimaced. "I may startle you yet with

some intelligence of my own, old boy. I have my secrets, too."

"I'm sure of it," retorted Colt, as he rose to leave. "They're all mixed up with amber eyes, aren't they, Jimmy? Now, don't blush! Unless I'm wrong, the lady's sister tumbled to it just as I did."

"What do you mean?"

"There, there, you've had enough excitement for to-day," he patted his friend absently. "When you 'fess up, I'll perhaps return the compliment. I say, perhaps— Anyhow, see you to-morrow at the Office. Hope to have news of Cynthia by then. I'm hot on her trail. See you don't get into any female clutches, Jimmy. Just look where it leads you! Distressing . . . !"

"Don't try to be funny!" admonished Jimmy.

"Never more serious in my life!" Colt took his hat and gloves from the waiting boy, and as he turned to tip him, he noticed a worried expression on Jimmy's face. "Au revoir, Jimmy! Better consider my warning seriously!" He waved airily and disappeared into the night, leaving Armstrong staring after him.

He walked the mile and a half which separated his ancestral mansion from the League Club. He liked to walk, and especially he wanted to walk at

this moment, walk and ruminate on Jimmy's expression.

His wandering thoughts could not have been entirely happy. When he got home he appeared grave and troubled to the startled Sampson who met him breathlessly at the door.

"Lady to see you, Mr. Colt. Foreign dame. Black eyes. So . . ." He ogled and leered in alarming fashion.

Colt raised his eyebrows, and his face cleared.

"Show me," he ordered, succinctly.

Sampson preceded his master to the dimly lighted front room. It smelt musty from disuse. Colt was wondering vaguely who his late visitor could be and what she might want of him, when a petite black-gowned figure, chic from her tiny hat, set at a deliberately flirtatious angle, to her absurd high red heels, rushed toward him and grasped his arm.

"Oh, but I have so long been expecting you," a foreign-accented voice came to him, "and I will so soon be missed if I much longer remain away."

Colt drew back and surveyed his visitor. "Are you real or a creation of my disordered brain?"

"This morning I have so greatly desired to speak with you," went on the excited voice. "I have somesing which I must tell you, Meestair Colt. Mrs. Ribbelsdale says I must not tell you,

but I say you are the police, so when she think I am having my dinner I run away to you." The two bright black eyes were raised appealingly to Colt's comprehending gaze.

"So you are the children's nurse. I thought there was something familiar about you."

"You have seen me?"

"When I was at the house this morning. Then you disappeared and Miss Wilder said you had taken the children for an airing and that you had seen or heard nothing last night, so . . ."

"That is one beeg lie, Meestair Colt!" the voice became shrill with indignation. "I have told Miss Wilder and Mrs. Ribbelsdale, both of them, that I have seen and hear somesing which I would tell you, and only you. They ask and ask, but I do not tell it to them. I save it for you, Mr. Colt."

"Thanks awfully," Rodney smiled whimsically. "Sit down and have a cigarette," he held out his open case. "They're the kind all ladies like. I buy them especially. I smoke a pipe myself." He watched his visitor narrowly while she sank back on the ancient divan and blew little puffs of smoke happily into the air. She no longer seemed anxious to depart.

"Your name is Mademoiselle Monot, isn't it?" he asked.

"Félicité Monot, Monsieur. And what I shall

tell you will be felicity to your ears," she smiled, coquettishly. "I have made what you call a pun, is it not so, Monsieur?"

"A really beautiful pun, my dear Mademoiselle Monot. I wish I might listen to your puns forever. But, alas! time flies, and before your mistress comes to take you home, I want you to tell me your news."

"Eet is news . . . beeg, beeg news, Monsieur." She leaned forward impressively. "At the one of the clock, I have been to look out of my window this morning. My window sees the back of the house, you will remember. And at the back of the house at the early hour this morning there was someone walking. I have told no one. Only to you I tell it, Monsieur."

"You are going to tell me that you saw Mr. Ribbelsdale drive home."

"No, that I did not see. When I look from the window, his car it stands by the house. The car it is empty. I do not know how long it has stood there. I have been asleep. I wake because it is time for the baby's bottle. Always Dolly must have a bottle in the night long after she is so old as six months. It is not good, but always she must have it."

"I'm tremendously interested in the science of baby feeding, Félicité," interrupted Colt, earnestly.

"Some day we must have a talk about it. But for to-night it will be better for you to tell me what you saw from the window when you looked out into the dark. By the way, Félicité, how did it happen you could *see* anything? There wasn't a moon nor a star last night."

"I will tell you, Monsieur, how I see. It is by the light which shines from Meestair Peter's window. Ah, that surprises you, Monsieur! You think that Meestair Peter was asleep! You are wrong! But I will tell you something by which you will be much surprise."

"For heaven's sake, make haste! The suspense is bad for my heart!" Colt put his hand to his left side, and bent over as if in pain.

"Oh, but I am destitute! I will tell you quick. It was Miss Dorcas that I see so plain. She comes up the back driveway running. Then I hear, I cannot yet see anybody. Then she runs into the light which shines on the grass. I see that she is without any breath. She is dressed in her best clothes and she looks as if she tries to hide. Very, very quiet I hear her open the door to the sun room. Then I do not hear any more for many minutes. I listen but I hear nothing. Then I hear her door close to her room so very very softly, Monsieur. That is news, is it not?" Mademoiselle put her hand up to tuck back a re-

fractory hair, and looked sideways at Colt to see what effect her revelation was having.

"You think that Miss Wilder saw Mr. Ribbelsdale?"

The French girl spread out her hands and slightly shrugged her thin shoulders.

"But, yes, Monsieur. I have kept that to the very last. When I heard the door close I stick my head out of the window. I tell you but no one else. I wonder why Miss Wilder so sort of sneaky come home. So I look. And I see another patch of light on the grass beside the first one. I know what it is, Monsieur, it is the light from Mr. Ribbelsdale's study. Miss Dorcas has turn on that light. I ask you, Meestair Colt, must she not have seen her brother-in-law? He has come home. To-day he is dead in his chair in that room. Perhaps he is dead when she see him, and perhaps—" She paused, significantly. "I have tell it only to *you*."

"Quite right, too. Don't let on that you know a thing . . . but you have let on, I remember—" He paused thoughtfully. "Well, tell them you've forgotten what you saw, how's that?"

Félicité smiled understandingly. "I do anything for *you* . . ."

"I say, that's a risky offer!" Colt was obviously enjoying his visitor. "But I'd be jolly grate-

ful if you'd pay attention and answer a few questions carefully. Do that for me?"

She bent over and patted his knee. Taking the gesture as acquiescence, Colt continued:

"Tell me, Mademoiselle, have you ever thought that Mr. Ribbelsdale and his young sister-in-law were . . . rather . . . you know?"

"I only know, Monsieur, that they are very, v-ery, good friends. Miss Dorcas often say to me, 'Félicité, my brother is a wonderful man,' or, 'Félicité, if little David would be like his father he would be a great man.' You see, Monsieur, I only know that they are v-e-r-y good friends."

"Quite. A very affectionate family, taking them altogether," suggested Colt, rather grimly.

"And Meestair Jimmy Armstrong. Miss Dorcas and Mrs. Ribblesdale like him very very much, too. I hear Mrs. Ribbelsdale say to Miss Dorcas, 'I think Jimmy likes me as well as David does,' and Miss Dorcas say, 'Everyone loves you, Suzanne,' but she look as if she want to cry, then I say to myself, 'Félicité, Miss Dorcas love Meestair Armstrong.' I see many things, but I do not speak of them."

"I don't doubt it! How long have you been with the Ribbelsdales?"

"Since two years. I come when little David has his one year birthday."

"And you've noticed no change in the family since the elder Mrs. Ribbelsdale came to live with them?"

"Change? What you mean, Monsieur?"

"There's been no trouble, no jealousy?"

Félicité puckered her nose in an effort to recall something of interest to this delightful listener. But apparently she was unsuccessful, for she shook her head sadly. "I can think of nothing. Only Meestair Peter does not seem so friendly with his sister—not since three month or four."

"Ah—and why is that?"

"I think Meestair Peter does not like Meestair Jimmy Armstrong."

"You mean he suspects his sister is in love with him and he objects?"

"It may be so. I cannot say. I do not know. I think it is for Mrs. Ribbelsdale that he is angry."

"Well, it's getting late to go into the general mix-up. As you tell it, Félicité, it sounds pretty involved. Suppose we stick more or less to facts. Now, how long would you say it was between Miss Dorcas's entering the house, and the time you heard her bedroom door close? By the way, you're certain it was her door you heard?"

"But yes, Monsieur. I have wait five minutes, ten minutes. Then I open my door a very very leetle. Just as I open it I see Miss Dorcas turn

into her room and close her door. I do not hear her on the stairs. That is strange, Monsieur. She must be very quiet. But I hear her door and I see her dress a leetle. I know her dress. It is her best one."

"Do you think her brother saw her, too?"

Félicité shrugged. "I do not understand that strange boy. If he see her, he never, never tell. He is always very secret about everything, as if he was *afraid*, Monsieur."

"Afraid? Afraid of what?" Colt spoke almost sharply.

"How do I know, Monsieur? He is a strange young man. That is all I know. He hides and peeks around corners, and I find him whispering to Miss Dorcas, and when I see them he looks so scared. I laugh, Monsieur. Why should a young boy be scared in that big house with so many of us all together?"

"I wish to God I knew, Mademoiselle," said Colt earnestly, rising from his chair. "If I could discover why they all, yes, every one of them, were afraid, I'd be at least half way to the heart of the mystery." With apparent impulsiveness, he bent and took the French girl's hand in his.

"Félicité, will you be my aide-de-camp? Will you watch and listen, but never speak? Will you discover for me why they are afraid?"

"Oh, for you, Monsieur, I will do *anything*! I will spy, I will never sleep, I will find what it is that makes Meestair Peter lock his door and then bolt it besides. For you, Monsieur, I will do *anything*." She spoke with such eagerness as to provoke Colt to reply:

"Some day, I'll take you up on that! Beware! But at present I'm finding the business of hunting needles in the Ribbelsdale haystack much too fatiguing to permit of extraneous amusements however alluring. . . ." He bowed with mock seriousness.

"Oh, but Meestair Colt, I like very much being *your* aide-de-camp. Together we will learn much of your business and I will teach you many things besides, is it not so?" She looked up toward Colt's face but his eyes were intent on space. She shrugged and made a pretty grimace.

"I must go home now. I will leave you to your needles. See they don't prick you, Monsieur," and with that somewhat cryptic shaft she slipped through the doorway into the darkness.

When he was alone, Rodney Colt went at once to his room and automatically went through the process of undressing. Although the days had the warmth of Indian Summer the nights were chilly. He wrapped himself in a scarlet velvet bathrobe, and threw himself full length on the outside of his

narrow bed. From the small table at his side, he picked up an old envelope and a pencil. He had not anticipated the day's events, and was not provided with the proverbial note-book. But the back of a couple of old envelopes served as well for his purpose. This is what he wrote upon it in scrawling disjointed sentences:

First Day . . .

Jimmy interrupts my bath . . .

He knows more than he tells . . .

Where is the book which is missing from the book rack on David's desk? . . . Has it any significance?

At the beginning I suspect Suzanne R.

Then I suspect Mrs. Edith R.

Then I suspect Peter Wilder.

Then I am sure Dr. Scofield knows much he will not tell.

Then I find the letters from the unknown, Cynthia, and discover I have been a fool . . .

Yet those letters puzzle me even more than the people in that large brick house . . .

For many hours I think and think about those letters . . .

Then I know what puzzles me: It is the perfect handwriting. Can Cynthia be a writing teacher? How does she happen to write exactly as the samples in the school copy books? I know what is strange now. It is that such a woman as reveals herself in those letters, one so passionate, should write like that . . . It is not natural . . . I grope and grope, but do not find the explanation.

I must find that mysterious Cynthia.

I must discover the secret that Dorcas Wilder and Jimmy Armstrong share.

Why did Suzanne R. try to prevent her child's nurse

from seeing me? Does she suspect her young sister of something, and is she trying to protect her?

Above all, why is young Peter Wilder in such a state of fear? Why does he double-lock his doors? What is there in that house that makes them all so afraid? Even young Dorcas Wilder, even brave Suzanne R . . . Only Old Mrs. Edith is unafraid.

At the very end of one envelope, running off the corner for want of space, he added: "What poison was used to kill David R., and where was it obtained? And was he dead or alive when Dorcas W. turned up the light in his study at one o'clock?"

Never for an instant, since seeing Jimmy Armstrong's face that moment in his own dining room, had Rodney Colt felt that David Ribbelsdale had died a natural death.

Slowly and frowningly Rodney reread his pencil jottings. He wondered if Pinkerton's headman would make more of it than he did. He'd always rather flattered himself on his deduction, but he admitted, with a rueful grin at the empty room, that whatever powers he had weren't coping very famously with this problem in which Cynthia seemed to be the mystic key.

It was many hours before he slept.

WEDNESDAY
OCTOBER TWENTY-FOURTH

CHAPTER FIVE

EARLY on the following morning Jimmy Armstrong appeared at the District Attorney's office. In the waiting room he was accosted by Rodney's factotum, facetiously called "Apollo" by his boss.

"Mr. Colt said show you right in," he greeted Jimmy, beamingly. "Say, this here Ribbelsdale business looks like a wow, don't it, Mr. Armstrong?" He transferred his chewing gum from the roof of his mouth to its most efficient position, and began to chew rhythmically. "He's got a letter and bunch of telegrams, and he wouldn't even give me a look in," he continued confidentially, as he dogged Jimmy's footsteps to the door of a private office.

When Jimmy disappeared with an airy wave of his hand and the door closed firmly, Apollo retreated as far as a small mirror which hung on the wall. Here he paused to look with satisfaction at his slick black hair. He adjusted his tie to a nicety, and brushed a speck of dust from one shoulder. Then he sighed, and looked longingly at the door which led to Colt's office. His eager eyes

surveyed the room in hope of finding an excuse to knock. He sighed again and sat disconsolately down near the telephone board.

"Your baby doll's on the point of bursting, Colt," Jimmy remarked, as he settled himself comfortably in a big black leather chair opposite the official looking desk where Rodney was seated. "You really should be more careful of him. He has an extraordinarily confiding nature.

"With nothing to confide! Poor Apollo! How he thirsted and hungered for the contents of these," he indicated a disorderly pile of yellow envelopes. "They've all come in, Jimmy, and they're about as helpful as nothing. Tiffany has a record of the stationery all right. There were two sales, both to the same dame. Let's see," he picked up a letter from the heap of papers. "Here it is.

"On September 2, 1926, a woman giving her name as Mrs. Cynthia Stoddard ordered the stationery to which you refer. She called for it in person on September 19, leaving her die with us. We still have it in our possession. She gave her name and her address as 9753 Fifth Avenue. I have, since receiving your inquiry, ascertained that no such number exists. I can give you a brief personal description as follows: She appeared to be in her early thirties. She

had red hair, short and waved. Her eyes were blue. She was neither tall nor short; nor, though well groomed, was she dressed distinctively. My clerk thinks that he could identify her voice, which had a slightly foreign accent. It was a cash transaction and as she made a deposit at time of ordering we made no inquiries.' ”

He paused and shrugged slightly. “A very elusive lady, eh, what? And even more circumspective the second time. Listen to this, Jimmy!

“ ‘In view of your inquiries, however, a second transaction which we had with Mrs. Stoddard may be of interest. She again came into our store on February 14 of this year. I can give you the exact date because we have a record of the purchase. The same clerk, by a curious coincidence, happened to see her, and he recalls thinking that she had grown much stouter. Beyond that, she appeared the same, except that she was more sumptuously dressed, in a beautiful squirrel coat. Her hair was of so remarkable a color that it arrested my clerk’s attention and he is able to furnish these details. At that time he at once remembered the voice, the foreignness of which was even more marked than on the first occasion.

“ ‘But it is her purchase which I think

may interest you. She ordered from us a tiny platinum phial to be marked with the name "Cynthia," explaining to the clerk that she had been suffering from insomnia and wanted it to keep tenth-of-a-grain morphia tablets. She had brought some of the tablets with her and showed them to the clerk to give him an idea of the size she required. She also purchased a platinum chain on which to hang it, saying she wanted to keep it always with her. This time she gave her address as the Biltmore Hotel. But again she expressed a preference for calling for her purchase, and accordingly, on May nineteenth, it was called for and delivered. But not to Mrs. Stoddard in person. She sent her maid with a note and we gave it to her. The note was written on the paper we had furnished, and we kept it in case any question as to delivery should arise. You will find it enclosed.'

"Here's the note, Jimmy. Same handwriting. Short and to the point.

" 'Please give into the hands of bearer my purchase of February 14th and oblige,

" 'Yours sincerely,

" 'CYNTHIA STODDARD.'

"It's without address or date. And the maid not being exotic goes unremembered by the clerk. These telegrams only confirmed my fears. No one ever saw or heard of Cynthia. She's like a fairy-tale princess who vanishes at will or turns into a pumpkin. I don't like it, you know. Still there're one or two arresting points in the letter, Jimmy. An intelligent man penned it, mark my words. It raises several pertinent questions in my mind."

"You're getting more sleuthish by the minute!" Jimmy grinned. "Soon I'll find myself playing Watson to the great Sherlock!"

"You could do worse, my dear chap," retorted Colt with simulated sententiousness. "If I'm not so quick at deduction it's only lack of practice. It'll come in time. Now, tell me, Jimmy, what strikes you as singular in that letter."

"Fact Cynthia was so darn secretive two years ago. Wasn't planning to poison poor Dave that far back, was she?"

"Good! Not the most important point, but of interest, nevertheless."

"Hey, young feller, remember you're only a cub Assistant District Attorney! Don't act as if you were the whole Department of Justice!"

"Not so loud. Apollo's hero worship might receive a shock if he heard you. But to return to

this letter. I presume you expect to hear Ribbelsdale was poisoned with morphia?"

"Wrong, dear Sherlock! I was wondering if Dave got tired of the lady because she allowed his luxurious attentions to ruin her slender silhouette."

"I hadn't thought of that. That's a point. On February 14, Cynthia was fatter than at the time of her previous visit, when, we'll suppose, the affair was new. That's obvious!" He paused reflectively. Then, seeming to dismiss the lesser for the more important, continued brightly: "But I'm more concerned about this remarkable voice of hers. Distinctive enough to be remembered by a clerk who meets hundreds of charming women. Is she a singer? That would fit in with the foreignness which is hard to explain—yet this writing doesn't go with a temperamental foreign singer. I want you to examine these letters again, Jimmy." He rumaged about in a drawer and produced the bundle he had brought away from the Ribbelsdale home. "More like a writing-teacher, don't you think? Damn it, it puzzles me."

"Nothing in that—probably she went to a public school and had a crank for a teacher. Or, maybe she once lived in England and addressed envelopes for a living. Lots of explanations—but they won't lead anywhere." Jimmy spoke with assurance. "I advise you to advertise for the lady—

or, better, for that maid—she may be an accomplice, and again she may be a perfectly innocent servant who has been deceived by her mistress.”

“You advise advertising! Something like this, I suppose: ‘Wanted: the maid of Cynthia Stoddard who went to Tiffany’s on whenever it was—’ Even if we got her, you could bet your sweet life we’d never get Cynthia, after having so kindly warned her off! No, it isn’t going to be as simple as all that. And I’ve only six days before Pulver returns! Six days! I——”

A discreet knock on the door interrupted them.

“Dr. Scofield wants ter talk ter you,” Apollo stuck his head through the doorway.

“Thanks.” Colt swung around in his chair and reaching for the telephone drew it to him.

“Hello! Yes, this is Rodney Colt. Yes. No trace of any poison, you say. You tested for morphia? Yes. Nothing? . . . Thanks! Yes, that puts a different light on the matter—yes.” Colt put the receiver back with a snap. “A ve-ery different light, Dr. Scofield,” he muttered under his breath, as he turned to the expectant Jimmy.

“The autopsy reveals no trace whatever of poison—so Dr. Scofield has just told me.”

“That means that David wasn’t murdered? That all this fuss has been for nothing?” Jimmy hesitated, but only for an instant. “I don’t believe it,

Colt! Damned if I do! I bet Scofield's lying!"

Colt reached over and grasped Jimmy's hand. Both were silent for some time. Then again came an interruption in the guise of a telegram.

Colt ripped it open, and after a hasty perusal handed it to Jimmy. It was brief and to the point.

CYNTHIA STODDARD UNKNOWN AT BILTMORE
HOTEL.

"There's something damn fishy about that dame, Colt, whether she murdered David or not," observed Jimmy, thoughtfully. "Perhaps she had a poison that leaves no trace. I've read—" He paused and changed color.

Colt was too absorbed in his own reflections to notice Jimmy's discomfiture.

Suddenly he looked up. "Let's go out to Ribbelsdale's again, Jimmy," he said. "You can make some excuse. I want another view of a certain bookshelf."

"What the devil——?"

But Colt showed no inclination to explain. With a shrug Jimmy took up his hat and gloves and followed his friend to the car.

On this ride Colt was more talkative than he had been the previous day.

"Drive slowly, Jimmy. I want to ask you a

few questions about the doctor," he put his hand on his companion's arm.

"I don't know much about him. I have Dr. Masefield when I'm ill, which I never am."

"Have some respect for grammar, anyway," rejoined Colt. "What I'm wondering is if the dear doctor is a maternity specialist, if that's what you call 'em, a fellow who brings poor sufferin' infants into this wicked world, I mean."

"Let's see. He may be at that! He was certainly on hand when Dave's children made their appearance. He goes in for this— Oh, you know! I forget what they call it."

"Twilight sleep," suggested Colt.

"Something like that. He believes in nature's way and so do I."

"You might have other views if you were a prospective mother, Jimmy," observed Colt.

"Anyhow Suzanne had it with the last baby," went on Jimmy, completely ignoring Colt. "It's wonderful, she was telling me. They put you in a dark room all hung with black curtains, and give you some sort of a hypodermic and that's all you know about it. You don't actually go to sleep, but the drug they give you causes forgetfulness."

"Analgesia and amnesia," offered Colt.

Jimmy nearly collided with a passing truck in his astonishment.

"How come you're an authority?"

"I'm not. But in my spare time—while society has been giving me the cold shoulder—I've had leisure from my arduous political duties to make a study of several things, poisons among them. And the drug used in twilight sleep happens to be a favorite of mine. But don't let me interrupt your talk about our doctor. Tell me all you know about the old boy."

"I tell you, Colt, he's not a friend of mine," Jimmy sounded exasperated. "He was once smitten with Dave's mother if the quidnuncs are correct."

"They aren't—usually," interrupted Colt. "But this time they may have hit the mark—the exception that proves the rule, don't you know?"

"Huh," snorted Jimmy. "Some of your fine observations, I suppose."

"Quite," countered Colt. "And before the day is over I shall have some questions to ask you. Even you, James. My observing faculties were in A1 condition yesterday. Fact!"

"Then undoubtedly you've discovered all about the doctor," said Jimmy, coldly.

Colt deigned to make no reply. His previous curiosity about the doctor had either been satisfied or for some reason known only to himself he preferred not to pursue the subject. Whatever

the cause, he did not again mention Dr. Scofield's name during the remainder of the drive to the Ribbelsdale house.

It was not until they were again entering the doorway under the wide *porte cochère*, that Rodney Colt realized that he had not mentioned to his friend the visit of Mademoiselle Monot.

CHAPTER SIX

SUZANNE RIBBELSDALE herself opened the door to them.

"I saw your car," she said, as she glanced towards Colt, almost shyly. "Come right in. You've heard the good news, if one can call anything good news, from Dr. Scofield?" She raised her carefully groomed eyebrows in question.

"Yes," burst out Jimmy, impulsively. "But we don't believe him, do we, Colt?" He turned in time to catch a frown of annoyance on his friend's face. In an effort to cover his mistake, he blundered on.

"You see, Suzanne, it's impossible that Dave should have committed suicide."

"Of course—there was no poison—" Unobserved, young Peter Wilder had approached through the dining room. He spoke with difficulty, but his face was cold. "To what do we owe this honor?" He bowed with mock humility in their direction.

A shadow of sympathy crossed Colt's face. It was so fleeting that only Peter Wilder noticed it.

A sudden pallor overspread the immobile face as he turned on his heel. His hands which hung by his sides were so tightly clenched that the nails drove painfully into the palms. But he did not look back.

"What the devil's come over Peter?" asked Jimmy.

Suzanne shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

"It's this house," she said with assumed lightness. "It's hoodooed, voodooed—even haunted! They're all frightened to death of something. *I'm* even beginning to feel queer," she smiled with obvious effort. "I used to pride myself on my sanity and disbelief in the supernatural . . . but . . ."

"You believe that something supernatural may have caused the death of your husband?" Colt asked.

"No, I don't!" she replied definitely. "I believe what Dr. Scofield does—and yet—" Colt couldn't help noting her evident beauty and charm, as she sat in the low chair, her head bent slightly toward him and the troubled puzzled expression in her clear blue eyes.

"At least one of us has seen a ghost," Suzanne said very softly.

"What!" exclaimed Jimmy. "When?"

"Where?" added Colt.

"I shouldn't have said that," Suzanne bit her lip. "I don't know what's come over me. I'm getting as silly as the rest."

"Here comes Dorcas," Jimmy interrupted, as steps sounded on the stairs. "I was wondering where she was. And Mrs. Ribbelsdale is with her." He walked into the hall to meet her.

Dark circles under the amber eyes and a drawn expression around the sweet full mouth were the only signs of the strain Dorcas Wilder was undergoing. Her manner was quiet and composed as she came into the music room with David's mother leaning on her arm.

"I'm glad to see you, Jimmy," she said simply. "And you, Mr. Colt. You must forgive Peter," for an instant beseeching eyes were raised to Rodney Colt. "He hasn't been himself since—" The husky voice trailed off, as Dorcas turned to place a cushion at the older woman's back. "We've all been through a trying time—but now it's over."

"Is it over?" Edith Ribbelsdale interrupted.

A shiver shook Dorcas Wilder, but she spoke quietly enough.

"Of course it is, grandmother Edith. Nothing can bring Dave back to us, but it is comforting to know that we couldn't have saved him, that we weren't lacking in vigilance."

"Vigilance?" Suzanne spoke for the first time since her sister and mother-in-law had joined them.

"What do you mean?"

"She is referring to the mysterious Cynthia, I presume," Colt answered for Dorcas. "Jimmy and I have given a lot of thought to her, too. But I won't pain you by going into it further. Now that we have Dr. Scofield's assurance——"

"But you don't believe him," Suzanne challenged.

"No, I don't—that is, I believe him, but I still think there is something about Mr. Ribbelsdale's death which we don't know or understand," Colt spoke slowly and deliberately. "If you will give me permission, I want to have a formal post mortem made by Doctor Dayton, our Medical Examiner."

"Do you need my permission?" There was a suspicion of harshness in Suzanne's voice.

"I ask it."

"Then you have it! We have nothing to hide, any of us. And if I must suffer—if this affair of Cynthia must be raked up and bandied about, I will bear it."

"I thought you gave Dr. Scofield your word," Edith Ribbelsdale interposed, scornfully.

"I did. But you shouldn't reproach me, if I put your son's honor before my own. It is be-

cause he is dead and cannot defend himself!" Colt was conscious of speaking like a hero in melodrama, but he did it deliberately. And the sudden light in the brick black eyes with which the gaunt tragic mother had been regarding him told him that he had gained his point.

"Where can all this talking, talking lead?" Dorcas was tensely in earnest. "Can't you *do* something?"

"I'm trying—" Colt sounded so abashed and apologetic, Jimmy couldn't believe his ears. "Come on, Jimmy, I want another look at the study where the—where—" Colt took Jimmy's arm and led him through the sun room, before his friend was aware of his intention.

"What's the idea?" asked Jimmy when they were inside the study and the door had been closed. "You came down off your high perch with a vengeance."

Colt made no reply. He had walked directly to the bookshelf which flanked the large desk on either side. He did not touch the books but read a title slowly and softly: "Twilight Sleep."

"What the devil?" Jimmy came to his side.

"Don't touch it!" came sharply from Colt, as his impulsive friend reached out for the volume which was interesting him. "Though if there are finger marks they'll probably be useless. Still—"

He took from his pocket a large clean silk handkerchief and gingerly drew out the book and wrapped it in it. "Still, this is the way they do it in books!" He turned to the gaping Jimmy with a delightful grin. "Eh, what, Watson?"

A sound caused both men to turn simultaneously toward the door which was opening swiftly. The regal white-crowned head, the live black eyes, the tall frail figure of the dead man's mother, appeared. She closed the door quickly and leaned against it as if faint. Her plain black dress, unrelieved even by a touch of white, set off the paleness of her wrinkled face. She was a touching figure, as she stood clinging to the knob. Colt hastened to her side.

"Lock the door—quickly," she gasped. "I must talk to you *alone*."

Jimmy had come forward, and it was he who turned the key. Then one on either side they assisted the trembling woman to the nearest chair.

"Come," she motioned imperiously to a stool close to her side. "I must speak low and quickly. I did not know whether to tell you, but when you spoke of David's honor, as you did——"

Colt knew that his histrionic efforts were to have their reward.

"Last night—or early this morning—I saw *Cynthia*!"

"What?" Jimmy gasped, but Colt remained quietly attentive. It was almost as if he had expected something of the sort.

It was with difficulty that Edith Ribbelsdale continued. "I'm afraid," she said softly, as she glanced furtively toward the window.

Colt reached out and took the cold stiff fingers in his hand protectingly.

"You must be brave. She can hold no danger for you. She has done her work here."

"But no," she stopped and lifted her head as if listening. Her black eyes shone feverishly. "She feels that I am on her trail. She fled past my door as one possessed. She came here," she pointed a shaking finger to the bookcase. "She put something there. I couldn't tell what. I was frightened," she finished apologetically.

"It was only a book, Mrs. Ribbelsdale," said Jimmy in a reassuring voice. "Mr. Colt has it in his pocket now—the book she left, I mean. She only came for that."

Edith Ribbelsdale shook her head dubiously. She had gradually regained her self-control.

"No— She fears me. Otherwise why did she run away when I called to her?"

"You called to her?" Colt spoke sharply. "When? Why?"

"I knew it was Cynthia. The red hair, bobbed

—just as in the letters. None of us have red hair.”

“What did you say to her?” Colt asked with repressed eagerness.

“I called, ‘Cynthia, come here, I won’t hurt you. Cynthia.’ I must have repeated her name several times. I don’t remember very clearly. I was too frightened.”

“And yet you called her!”

“I felt that I had to see her—to talk to her.”

“You thought she might be someone you know?” Colt asked very gently.

Mrs. Ribbelsdale started, but she made no direct reply.

“I heard her first on the stairs,” she continued hurriedly. “I followed her here. When she came out of here I hid behind the long curtains in the sun room. She went swiftly upstairs.”

“Why again upstairs? You said you first heard her on the stairs.”

“I don’t know. I was confused. After a time I came from my hiding place and crept upstairs. Just as I reached the door to my room, she came out.”

“From your room?”

“Yes, I drew back. I was startled. Then I was filled with the overpowering need to see her closely. But at the sight of me she had fled. The

light was very dim. My eyes aren't what they used to be. I couldn't see her. I called, but had no answer."

"Didn't the others wake up?" asked practical Jimmy.

"No— Now that you mention it, it is strange, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is strange," said Colt, quietly.

"Do you think the others saw her, too, and were frightened?" Mrs. Ribbelsdale was perplexed.

"It may be. Have you told anyone of this?" Colt patted her hand awkwardly.

"No one," she sighed heavily. "The doctor hasn't been in to-day, and there is no one else I could confide in."

"I see. You aren't intimate with your daughter-in-law and her half brother and sister?"

"I trust no one," she said simply.

"But surely they ought to be told," protested Jimmy.

All three sat silent for a moment. Suddenly Colt crossed the room in three strides and flung open the door. He rushed through the sun room, but he saw no one. He returned somewhat disconcerted.

"I could have sworn someone was there," he asserted emphatically.

"And I," said Jimmy.

Edith Ribbelsdale had risen. She was standing erect, her proud eyes straight in front. All her former terror had gone from her. It seemed impossible that the haughty self-possessed woman who faced him was the frightened old lady who had been telling her story.

"What is to be, will be," she said with gentle resignation, as she composedly gave her hand to each of the men in turn. "You are both friends of my dead son. I implore you, as you believed in him, not to let go this case."

Her earnest composure was in a way more alarming than her terror, Colt felt. It had an air of fatalism that worried him. But before he could speak again, she was gone. He closed the door and perched himself on the arm of a chair.

"Now what do you make of that, Watson?" he asked as he selected from his case a long Russian cigarette and put the cotton-filled end in his mouth.

"I'm stumped," admitted Jimmy candidly. "I've always liked the old lady. But she's either lying or crazy this time."

"Yet we found the book."

"What's to have prevented her putting it there herself and inventing that yarn when she came in and saw it was gone?"

"I say, Jimmy, you're coming on, you know!"

Colt's voice was filled with admiration, but

Jimmy, knowing his friend, was suspicious of an undercurrent of mockery.

"Well," he defended himself, "perhaps you'll tell me why this mysterious Cynthia should come back here and run her head into the noose? For all she knew, she'd run into one of us detectives! And just to return a book? I guess not! How'd she get in? I presume the doors are locked at night. It's too fantastic, Colt. It won't go down with me! Mrs. Ribbelsdale must be having hallucinations."

Colt slid into the chair and lounged back. He puckered his lips and whistled softly.

"Exactly. And just because it is absurd I'm inclined to believe it. It's mad—incredible—but I know old Mrs. Ribbelsdale is genuinely frightened—and she doesn't impress me as a lady likely to be afraid of ghosts."

"Well, how do you explain it?" Jimmy demanded truculently. "You ought to purchase a book of synonyms, Jimmy. You've begun every sentence this morning with 'well.'"

"Well—the devil I have! And what's that to do with the finding of old Dave's murderer? You're wasting a lot of time, if you ask me. I think we'd better get in the police. We need help."

Colt laughed lightly.

"You tempt me to slang, Jimmy. Keep your

shirt on, old boy! It's a hell of a muddle, and if I don't get something definite by to-morrow, I promise to give Flynn a ring."

Jimmy was suddenly repentant. He knew what it would cost Rodney Colt to bring in the Inspector. He knew, too, that the Assistant District Attorney would have some pretty stiff criticism to face, if nothing worse, when it was publicly learned that he had tried to hog the case. The years that Rodney had been ostracized and yet kept a stiff upper lip, the years he had done all the work for Pulver and got none of the credit, came to him in a flood and all his irritation disappeared. He believed Colt had it in him to be a great detective, if he had the chance. His faith came back in a wave, and he grasped Colt's hand.

"Forget it, Rod," he unconsciously used the name he had dropped with their college days. "I guess the house gets on my nerves too. I don't wonder Suzanne and the bunch of them think there's something spooky about it."

"I want time to mull it over. I don't believe there's any further danger. I think old Mrs. Ribbelsdale is needlessly alarmed—still, if you're intimate enough to stay here for lunch without being asked, I wish you'd hang around while I go back to the office and ruminate in solitude. I'd like to feel you were on the spot. You're honest, Jimmy,

whatever your limitations. You wouldn't let harm come to a frail old lady if you could help it. You're chivalrous, if nothing else."

"Thanks, and thanks again," Jimmy grinned good-naturedly. "Sure, I'll stay, if you want me to. I've been thinking myself that a man's needed here. Peter's no better than an hysterical girl. The mystery of it's getting on all their nerves. They're scared because they can't understand it."

"Or because they can," observed Colt, ambiguously, as he rose to go.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COLT had scarcely left by the front door—he was walking the longish distance to his office—when Jimmy heard the high piping voice of a child and Mademoiselle appeared leading little David by the hand.

“You-hoo! Uncle Jimmy,” chirruped the youngster running with squeals of delight to the outstretched arms. “Wha’ did you bwing me?”

The trusting eyes were raised expectantly, when the nurse reached out and grasped David’s hand.

“Come,” she said. “Your uncle is busy and worried this morning.”

Félicité Monot presented a much more demure exterior than on her visit to the Assistant District Attorney the night before. Her full lips were still rouged and an exotic perfume poured in waves into Jimmy’s face. The gray uniform and little bonnet with long streamers, although becoming and worn with an air, were more effacing than the frocks of her own choosing. But nothing could hide the come-hither look of her black eyes whenever they encountered a man.

"You mus' come, David," she repeated. "We have the little sister to take for a walk."

David's plump face puckered ominously.

"You mustn't cry, Dave," broke in Jimmy, as he squeezed the little fellow in his arm. "We're all sad because your daddy has gone away, and you must be a good boy and help Mother."

The soothing voice had the desired effect and the imminent tears were stayed, though the youngster's little lips still trembled as he reluctantly took his nurse's hand and pattered off, his fat legs bumping into each other at every step.

"Poor little chap," thought Jimmy, as he watched their departure, and quickly came the additional certainty: "I don't like that French female—and I don't trust her." Jimmy rather believed in intuition.

And if he could have read the thoughts of the French woman he would have found that he was playing a large and equally unfavorable part in them.

Jimmy started in search of Dorcas Wilder. He had wanted desperately to see her alone, but no chance afforded itself. Nor was he to be more fortunate this time, for when he found Dorcas in the sun room, Suzanne was with her.

"Where's the great detective?" Dorcas greeted him.

"He's gone. I'm staying for lunch, if you'll have me," he flung himself into a wide chair.

"Of course, we want you," replied Suzanne softly, as a mist clouded her blue eyes. "I need someone like you, Jimmy. I feel so alone."

"Well, you've got me, Suzanne!" was the cheerful reply. "I'm here to stay this trip."

A wide sweet smile lit up the young widow's face. She was dressed completely in black, a straight little frock of crêpe, relieved only by exquisite lace cuffs and collar. She looked, as she had said she felt, bereaved in the deepest sense. But at Jimmy's assertion of fidelity, a glow seemed to shine through the pallor; it was as if Suzanne had found a new friend.

Dorcas Wilder was sitting in a corner and staring through the window at the lawn and gardens. She, too, was dressed entirely in black, though her sister had insisted that it was unnecessary. "*I feel* mournful," she had retorted, and so it had been.

She turned for a fleeting glance when Jimmy entered, then immediately resumed her sad contemplation of the outside world. It was as if she couldn't escape ever to the gay living world outside, beyond the present. She wanted terribly to speak to Jimmy, to ask his advice. She had not slept the night before, and her thoughts were

agony. Yet the shyness, the reticence which had so charmed Jimmy, was holding her back. She was perhaps more frightened than any of the others, but she hid it under a gallant little smile and a firmly set chin. Only the lovely amber eyes, gold-flecked depths of sheer beauty, were indescribably sad.

So they sat, these three. A desultory conversation, in which each tried with painful obviousness to avoid the only subject which occupied their thoughts, filled up twenty minutes, a half hour, an hour, and still, to Jimmy's dismay, Suzanne showed no signs of leaving. He felt once or twice toward the end of the hour that she was deliberately staying to prevent him from speaking privately to Dorcas. He began to feel disturbed. The house was beginning to work its spell on him, he thought grimly. It was as if David were away on one of his periodical trips, except that no one spoke of him.

When a clock somewhere in the depths of the house chimed twelve, the three were still together.

At the last stroke, as if it had been a signal, Dorcas rose, and with a lithe quickness walked past Jimmy. In the doorway, she paused.

"You had better call Mother Ribbelsdale," said Suzanne. "Lunch will be ready in half an hour, and I want to talk to Jimmy."

Dorcas drew back at the last sentence, a shadow passed over her face and was gone. Her hand fluttered where it lay against the door frame.

"I was going to look for her," she said. "I have been wondering why she didn't join us."

"It's perfectly natural, Dorcas, for her to desire privacy in her sorrow," Suzanne said, chidingly. "You don't seem to understand."

Dorcas's eyes dropped under the intent gaze of her sister. She turned, silently, and walked lightly away.

Suzanne sighed, then suddenly lifted her eyes and looked full at Jimmy. He did not notice her scrutiny. She waited several minutes, then as he still seemed unaware of her presence, a light half-laugh broke from her lips.

"You're always thinking of—of someone else, Jimmy," she said.

"Of you, this time, Suzanne," Jimmy smiled sheepishly at her. "And of what an ass you must think me."

"Because you're so upset about David? I love you for it."

"Ah! David— If I could have known—but no matter! What had we been discussing? Oh, yes, the glaring honesty of Al Smith and its probable effect on the voters! You never used to be interested in politics, Sue."

"I'm not now—and you know it!" a wan smile flitted from her lips to her eyes. "But one must pass the time—somehow."

"Poor Sue," Jimmy took the hand which lay so near to his on the arm of her chair. "Poor Sue."

Neither spoke again. They sat silently. No sense of time obtruded on their thoughts. Jimmy heard a single stroke of the clock and suddenly realized that Dorcas should have returned. A vague uneasiness crept into his being. Suzanne still sat—quietly—like one who holds one's breath—and waits.

"Hell!" expostulated Jimmy, half audibly. "This damn house must be haunted."

Suzanne, startled from her thoughts, looked strangely at Jimmy and then at the tiny watch which gleamed on her slim wrist.

"What can be keeping Dorcas?" There was an uneasiness in her voice, too, Jimmy observed. "I'll go and see." She rose slowly, almost reluctantly.

Jimmy jumped to his feet at her side. He took her arm in his, half protectingly. She pressed closer.

"I'll come with you, Sue. I don't like it. Colt—" he stopped abruptly, realizing that he might be betraying a confidence.

Suzanne slacked her hastening steps, and looked almost fearfully into Jimmy's confused face.

"Colt? What about him? You must tell me, Jimmy— What did he say?" Imperiously, eager, she grasped his arm slightly.

"Nothing that matters. I'll tell you later. Let's find Mrs. Ribbelsdale and Dorcas now."

They were mounting the stairs when he suddenly asked:

"Where is Peter? I haven't seen him since Colt left."

"He's about the grounds, or was. I sent him out of the house—he's on the verge of a breakdown, poor boy." Suzanne's voice was concerned. She seemed to have lost all interest in the Assistant District Attorney. A serenity had come into her face and manner.

By the time she had finished speaking they were at the head of the stairs, three more steps and they stood in the open doorway which led to Mrs. Ribbelsdale's room. To Jimmy's astonishment, Dorcas was sitting silently in a chair staring out of the window. It suddenly struck him that she must be watching for someone or something. Who? And what?

On the high old-fashioned four-poster bed, lay the recumbent figure of Mrs. Ribbelsdale. She was sleeping. On the table by her side stood a

small tray with a bottle of medicine and an empty tumbler. Dorcas rose at their approach and put a finger on her lips, cautioning quiet.

"She's been asleep ever since I came in," she whispered. "Poor thing, let her sleep. She needs it."

Suzanne acquiesced with an understanding nod, but Jimmy was not so satisfied. It crept gradually into his consciousness that Colt had feared something like this. He strode over to the bed, and looked down onto the sleeping face of the older woman. He bent lower to assure himself that she was breathing.

He was perplexed as to what his course of action should be. After staring reflectively at the white wrinkled face, which even in sleep had a troubled aspect, he motioned to Suzanne. Dorcas had already left the room. Suzanne came at once to his side. Together they stared down at the recumbent figure. Then Suzanne bent forward and gently shook her by the shoulder.

But this did not disturb the deep sleep of Edith Ribbelsdale. Suzanne shook again, more firmly. But again it elicited no response. Jimmy felt himself shaking. He knew he must wake the sleeping woman at any cost. He took hold of the thin arm nearest his. It felt cold to his touch. He shook it gently—more vigorously—violently. He

tried to lift her. He was beside himself. A great sob of frustration and fear rose in his throat. He could scarcely control his voice to speak.

"Suzanne—Sue—" he stammered, disconnectedly. "Why won't she wake? What's the matter? Help me! We must wake her. We *must!*"

Footsteps, hurried, almost running, were mounting the stairs. Jimmy's heart leaped hopefully. Perhaps help was at hand. Then his spirits fell. It was Peter Wilder, pale, drawn and wild-eyed who rushed panting into the room. The boy stopped short several feet from the bed, and stared at them. His breath came in short dry gasps. He drew a long slender hand across his eyes, as if to shut out the scene before him. Then he drew himself up and walked heavily across to the mantelpiece and leaned against it. He had not spoken a word.

"Something must be done." It was Jimmy who spoke, but his voice was so strained and husky he scarcely recognized it as his own. "She's alive, alive, I tell you—but she won't wake up—it's terrible."

"It may just be a sleeping powder, Jimmy," Suzanne suggested, but by the tone of her voice, he knew she didn't believe it herself. "We mustn't give way."

"But don't you see, Sue," Jimmy groaned. "It's

the way Dave died—he went from a long deep sleep into death.”

Suzanne’s face had undergone subtle changes during Jimmy’s unconscious revelations. How could he know so well how David died, she asked herself. What did Jimmy—and Colt—know that they were keeping from her? She came to a sudden decision.

“Quick, Jimmy, telephone for Dr. Scofield,” she commanded. “We mustn’t linger like this. If anything has happened, we need help at once. Telephone, and come back to me. I’ve no idea what to do, but I’ll watch until your return.”

It had been coming over Jimmy that his first duty was to call Colt, so he raced down the stairs three at a time to the telephone in the hall. Here he first gave the number of the district attorney’s office. Apollo’s voice answered.

“Is Mr. Colt there? Mr. Armstrong, speaking.”

“No, sir. He just left,” Apollo’s voice caught the excitement from Jimmy’s. “But he’s walking, and if I run, I think I can catch him.”

“Do it. And tell him to rush to Ribbelsdales’—got the name?”

“Yes, sir, anything happened?” Apollo was breathless.

“Beat it!” shouted Jimmy, and slammed the receiver.

Quickly he lifted it again to his ear, only to remember that he didn't know Dr. Scofield's number. In desperation, he searched about for a directory. Somewhere in the distance he was conscious that a bell rang. The maid passed him in the direction of the front door. He heard a masculine voice, and gave a yelp of joy. It was Dr. Scofield.

He raced at the astonished doctor and grabbed him by the arm. At sight of Jimmy the bland countenance of the doctor changed suddenly.

"What's the matter, Armstrong?" he tried to steady his voice.

"It's Mrs. Ribbelsdale. Quick, you may save her," Jimmy tugged vigorously at his arm, but Dr. Scofield seemed to have lost the power of motion. For an instant he stood as if stunned, murmuring under his breath, "Edith, Edith."

Jimmy felt there was something extraordinarily pitiful in his misery, and at another time he would have hesitated to obtrude, but he believed that prompt action might save the woman upstairs from slipping silently into an eternal sleep, and he was determined to leave no stone unturned. He shook the doctor, as he said firmly:

"You must come quickly. You mustn't stand like this. Mrs. Ribbelsdale needs you, needs your help, I tell you!"

"I would give my life to save her," the older man said, simply. "I will go with you."

He turned and followed Jimmy up the stairs, making a superhuman effort to gain control of himself.

Peter was still standing immobile by the fireplace. Suzanne was walking nervously up and down by the bedside.

"Thank God, Doctor," she greeted them, as she put her hands out to Dr. Scofield.

The doctor brushed her aside, unseeing, as he hastened to the bed. He bent his head very low, and Jimmy thought he heard him say, "Forgive me."

There was a minute of breathless silence as Dr. Scofield took her slim wrist in his hand.

"It is too late," he said gently, as he laid the hand back on the bedspread.

And suddenly Jimmy realized that from the instant he had greeted Dr. Scofield at the door, the doctor had known that it was "too late."

To the little group came the sound of hastening feet, and Rodney Colt stood in the doorway.

At a glance every detail of the room impressed itself on Colt's mind.

The square room with its warm yellow walls hung with reproductions of the Italian primitives, its colorful cretonne window curtains which

caught the sunlight as they swayed in the slight breeze; its thick soft rug woven by hand in far-off Persia. The fireplace was filled with wood, ready for lighting, the toilet articles were awry on the dressing table, the chest of drawers, the low easy chair and Martha Washington sewing table between the windows, and first and last with painful vividness the four-poster bed with its recumbent figure.

Peter Wilder, Colt noted, was standing with crossed arms by the side of the fireplace, like a person in a trance, staring wild-eyed at the scene before him. Suzanne was bending tenderly over the prostrate figure of the dead woman; Dr. Scofield was at her side, a peculiar expression about his mouth, an expression which was to puzzle Colt for some time. Jimmy, agitation written all over his face, advanced to meet him. From down the hall at his right appeared the petite figure of Félicité Monot, drawn from her duties in the nursery by the unwonted confusion. Of all the household, only Dorcas Wilder was missing.

"It's happened," said Jimmy. "What she feared—she's dead."

"Were you here when she died?" Colt asked Dr. Scofield as he came to his side. He watched him closely, as the man hesitated, then replied:

"I was."

"You had been called?"

"I had Jimmy phone for him," interposed Suzanne, in a broken voice.

"But I arrived as he was telephoning, if I do not mistake," said the doctor. "I came in answer to a call from her," he bent his head toward the dead woman. "I was out on an urgent case, and only received the message on my return to my office. She had wanted to tell me something."

"Perhaps I know what it was," Colt said. "She feared this—she had a talk with Armstrong and me this morning."

"And you knew, and you let it happen!" Dr. Scofield exclaimed in pain.

"Don't!" Jimmy interposed. "It's all my fault. He left me here to take care of her and I've failed, failed miserably."

"Come, this won't do!" Colt spoke sharply. "Jimmy, go down and phone Inspector Flynn. Tell him that Mrs. Edith Ribbelsdale has been murdered and he's to come around at once. Now, Dr. Scofield," he turned to the physician, "I don't want to reproach you, but if I had resisted your appeal this might never have happened. We can't keep it out of the papers any longer. The authorities must come in—and David Ribbelsdale's body must be handed over to Dr. Dayton, our Medical Examiner for further examination and tests."

"You're accusing me of supressing evidence?" Dr. Scofield demanded angrily.

"I'm accusing no one. But I doubt if you tested for hyoscine. And I am positive that hyoscine is responsible for the sudden death of both David Ribbelsdale and his mother."

"It is almost impossible to find it by testing."

"So you didn't try!" Colt drawled. "The family and friends will have to retire now in favor of the police." He turned to Suzanne. "I'm mighty sorry, Mrs. Ribbelsdale, that it has come to this, but you will agree that to suppress it longer would be criminal."

"Of course—the law must take its course." She bowed her head. "I've tried to—I've tried," she turned away to hide the tears.

"I want to get the facts of the case as soon as possible. I'll make it as easy for you, Mrs. Ribbelsdale, as I can, but I'm afraid it will have to come out about Cynthia and all the rest of it."

Suzanne raised her head. A gallant little smile curved her lips. "I'll promise not to make a fuss," she said.

"Thank you. That will mean a great deal. I assure you we dislike prying into family privacy. Now I'd like to have a further talk with the doctor, then perhaps you and your brother," he looked round the room. "Where is Miss Wilder?"

"She was here—she went out when Jimmy and I came—I haven't seen her since," answered Suzanne.

"Find her while I talk to the doctor. I shall want to see Mademoiselle, too. The police will be here within an hour. In the meantime, nothing in this room is to be touched. I want you all to come out with me, and I'll lock the door." He went up to the table. "I think I'll just take this tray with the glass and medicine along with me now." He motioned the others to precede him and then locked the door. He glanced into the room opposite. "Might we go in here?" he asked.

"You may not!" For the first time Peter Wilder spoke, and his voice was emphatic. "I'll have no dirty detectives in my room. You can go to Hell, if you ask me!" He turned on his heel and entering the room, slammed the door and turned the key on the inside.

"Forgive him, Mr. Colt," begged Suzanne. "He's been totally unlike himself since David died."

"That's all right. I understand. We'll go downstairs. Jimmy, you stand here and guard the door."

Suzanne and Dr. Scofield told straight-forward stories which dovetailed perfectly with Jimmy's own account of the disastrous happenings of the

morning. Peter Wilder refused to come forth from his room, and Dorcas Wilder had not yet been found when the clock struck two and Dr. Scofield rose to go.

"I hate to leave, but my other patients need me," he said, as he slipped into his light overcoat.

"You may be right about it being poison, and hyoscine the drug," he added in a low voice. "I'd like to have a private talk with you at my office. I may be able to help you. Can you call around about five to-night?"

"Certainly. If you will be frank, Doctor, it may save other lives." Colt watched the suave departure with mixed feelings.

"Suzanne, you must find Dorcas!" he heard Jimmy insisting, as he returned to the drawing-room.

"She's old enough to take care of herself, Jimmy," was the retort. "You seem powerfully concerned."

"It's on my account," broke in Colt. "I must have a talk with your sister, and the sooner the better. The police will be here any minute, and we don't want Flynn asking more leading questions than necessary."

"I'll ask Mabel," consented Suzanne. "She's more likely to have confided her intentions to the servants than me!"

Colt whistled softly.

"Something tells me there's no love lost between these two girls, Jimmy," he said as soon as Suzanne was out of hearing. "She gives one the impression that Dorcas is capable of anything."

"She isn't," asserted Jimmy with fervor. "I believe we've all of us tried to keep things back, Colt, and look what it's led to. I, for one, want to make a clean breast. Can I come to your house early this evening and bring Dorcas Wilder, if she'll come?"

"Rather!" Colt's detached, half mocking attitude had returned. "I had an idea your chivalry would resent a helpless old lady being struck down in the dark."

"Mixed metaphors, as you love to tell me!" Jimmy almost smiled for the first time in three hours. "But, of course, you always mix them intentionally—just to put me at my ease, I suppose."

"Exactly. This has been a hectic noon, Jimmy, and we haven't come to the end of the tale yet. But let's hope that the capable Inspector and his boys will hurry the solution. I hear the familiar toot of his horn, methinks. The delicate sensibilities of the beautiful young widow are about to be roughly scarred, Jimmy. Our good Flynn is no respecter of persons. A murder's a murder to him and his crew—and between you and me,

Jimmy, it might have been better, if I'd let my head run this affair. When my tender heart gets mixed up I'm sure to act the fool."

"It doesn't seem real yet," said Jimmy, mournfully, as he watched the approach up the front path of Inspector Flynn, accompanied by the official photographer armed with his apparatus and the finger-print expert, Miles. "Dr. Scofield may be right. He thought it was shock, didn't he? I don't believe you'll find anything but heart medicine in that glass or bottle."

"Neither do I, Jimmy. And I doubt if Dr. Dayton will be able to swear to the administration of hyoscine in either case. The good doctor is an almost perfect case of *grosse tete et peu de sens*. But I'm as certain of it as I would be if a grain had been discovered in each stomach, or intestine, or wherever they find such things. That returned book and these sleeping deaths are no mere coincidence."

"By the way, Jimmy, there was nary a finger print on that book. They either cleaned it carefully or read it with gloves. We aren't dealing with a moron, Jimmy," he flung over his shoulder as he stepped jauntily into the hall and opened the door for the boys from the Detective Bureau.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS THE men filed in one after the other, Jimmy bent over the stair rail to listen. Inspector Flynn, who led the tiny procession, held out his hand to Colt and asked jauntily:

"Am I crazy? You phone me the old lady's dead, and your Greek had only hung up on the information that the master of the house had died no natural death. What's a poor man to think?"

"Apollo!" Colt shut his mouth grimly. "Wait till I catch the young scamp!"

"'Morning," greeted Dr. Dayton, laconically. "Where's the victim?"

"Above. My friend Armstrong, who's also a friend of the family, is up there watching the door. . . ."

Just then the doctor caught sight of Jimmy's intent gaze as he bent over the banister. They knew each other slightly. "Hello, Armstrong!" called Dr. Dayton. "So you're an interested party?" He started up the stairs, then turned to beckon the others. "You'll all be wanted up above. . . . Come along . . ."

Detective Miles, the finger-print expert, and Frank Hall, the official photographer, stopped for a brief greeting, then followed the doctor. Colt and Flynn brought up the rear. No member of the family was present when the five officials filed into the sunlit room where old Mrs. Ribbelsdale lay so quietly. Only Mademoiselle Monot peeked from behind the nursery door, and strained to hear any passing word.

Inspector Flynn turned at once to the finger-print expert.

"First go over these objects Colt's got here, Miles," he told him. "Then try everything else. I doubt if we'll find anything helpful, but routine's routine. . . ."

"O. K.," assented Miles, as he turned his attention to the tray and glass which Colt handed over to him. Jimmy watched fascinated, while the detective made his inspection. With a jeweler's glass in his eye, the tune of an old melody on his lips, on his face an expression of complete abstraction, Miles flashed his pocket light on every inch of them.

Meanwhile, Dr. Dayton, who had directly caught sight of the body, proceeded to the bedside, where he started to make a rapid examination of the dead woman, scrutinizing the eyes and hands with an alert interest.

"My God, she's still warm," he cried in dismay, as he grasped the arm of the dead woman. "Say, did you have a psychic premonition of the old lady's demise?" He turned a puzzled frown from Colt to Jimmy.

"Cheerio, doctor," Flynn interposed with a grin. "The acolyte's about to confess to me . . . you find out the cause. . . ."

"I am certain that Mrs. Ribbelsdale was poisoned with hyoscine," Colt stated quietly.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed the exasperated doctor. "If you know what the old lady died from, what did you get me here for?"

Colt smiled. "You're here, my dear old soul, to prove I'm right. . . ."

"You don't say." The doctor grinned elaborately. "You'll need my assistance and that of all the rest of us, if I'm any prophet. . . ."

Detective Miles interposed at this juncture. He had laid the tray and its contents down during the altercation of his colleagues and gone over to the dead woman.

"I've got something for you," he announced. "There's a thumb and two fingers on the tray, and, if I mistake not, the same thumb is here with four fingers," he pointed to the small table at the side of the bed on which the tray with its fatal glass had stood.

They all moved expectantly toward him as he spoke. He took out an insufflator, not unlike a minute hand bellows, and blew a fine pale-yellow powder smoothly over the surface of the table nearest to the dead woman. Then he bent forward and carefully blew away the surplus powder, leaving a distinct print of four fingers on the saffron surface.

"Where's the thumb print?" asked Flynn. "Over the edge?"

Miles nodded. He gently tipped the table, being careful not to touch the side adjacent to the bed. The procedure with powder and insufflator was repeated. Just beneath the top, on the polished surface of the side, distinctly appeared the print of a thumb.

"Beauties, ain't they?" observed Miles with the genuine delight of a connoisseur. "Now take a look at the tray. Same two fore fingers and thumb . . ."

Flynn sighed.

"Too much to expect they'll be of any use, Miles. Anyone cute enough to commit a murder with a house full of expectant witnesses probably isn't as stupid as that. Still we'd better get a picture." He motioned to the bored photographer, who had been looking on.

"Come along, Frank. Take the table first; then

the little old tray. Colt and I are debunking for the present. See you all later."

The Inspector and Colt turned toward the door, while the photographer hooked his camera to an adjustable tripod, and with meticulous care focused his lens.

Two flashlights were taken just as Jimmy slipped out to dog the footsteps of his friend Colt. Some minutes before, he had thought he distinguished Dorcas's voice below and his impatience had increased to the breaking point. He had been both bewildered and frightened by this second death. An implacable and hideous fate seemed to be at work in this pleasant house on the hill. Suddenly it had come over him that if he didn't talk with Dorcas before the others did, the wrong construction was certain to be put on her disappearance from the scene.

"Now, Colt," commenced Inspector Flynn as soon as they were comfortably seated in a quiet corner of the living room which commanded the approach from every direction, so as to preclude any eavesdropping. "I wish you'd give me any dope you have on the case. Who's in the household, what relation this has to Mr. Ribbelsdale's death, et cetera to the end of the tale. . . ."

"First, Flynn, I'd like to tell you honestly that if I hadn't been a conceited fool, you'd have been

called in before, and this might never have happened . . .”

“Here, here, my boy. When you’ve been in this game as long as I have you’ll know that emotions have no place in it. Dee-tached, that’s what you’ve gotta be, dee-tached.”

Colt smiled. He was glad to have the bluff Inspector at his side.

“Briefly these are the facts: David Ribbelsdale was found by the maid dead in his study. Jimmy—that’s the young dude you saw guarding the door when you arrived—Jimmy’s a friend of mine, you see, and he was a friend and partner of Dave Ribbelsdale, and he thought it was murder. We had a family pow-wow here and by the merest chance unearthed some old letters written by a woman who signed herself ‘Cynthia’ and who claimed to be Ribbelsdale’s mistress and further threatened desperate measures if he ceased to love her. Of course, I tried to get hold of this Cynthia, but she’s most elusive—” he paused reflectively—“most. It’s distressing . . . But to go on with my story, old Mrs. Ribbelsdale, the one dead upstairs was Dave’s mother and she told us only this morning that she had seen, or at least thought she’d seen, this mysterious Cynthia. And she was scared. I didn’t take her fear very seriously. There’s something freakish about this house, Flynn.

You'll discover it, if you hang around very long. And I laid her fright to some sort of hallucination brought on by the atmosphere of the place. I was just enough disturbed by it, however, to leave Jimmy as a sort of guardian angel . . . you know the rest. Jimmy and Suzanne—the young widow—went up to call Mrs. Ribbelsdale the elder for lunch and found her in a deep sleep. She was dead before Dr. Scofield arrived. . . .” Colt paused uncertainly, then added: “I think Dr. Scofield knows more than he has told. I believe that as soon as he heard of her strange sleeping condition he knew Mrs. Ribbelsdale was beyond hope. He’s asked me around to see him.”

“Go! By all means go. Doctors have to be close-mouthed; it’s the etiquette of their profession. But in a case like this it’s their duty to tell all they know. And Dr. Scofield is a man to do his duty no matter what it costs him.”

“’Um . . . perhaps . . .” Colt commented doubtfully. “Now, you know about all I do . . .”

“Hand you the berries,” broke in Doctor Dayton, who had finished his examination and, bag in hand, was ready to take his departure. “I’ve asked one of the boys to telephone for an ambulance to bring the body around to me for a post mortem. I want the man of the house, too. There’s dirty business abroad, and . . .”

"Shut up. . . . Here comes the widow . . ." warned the Inspector, as Suzanne appeared from the rear of the hall.

"I've been looking everywhere for Dorcas, Mr. Colt, but she seems to have vanished in thin air."

"Perhaps she dropped in at one of the neighbors," suggested Colt, lamely. "May I present Inspector Flynn and Doctor Dayton, our renowned Medical Examiner?"

While Suzanne, with admirable self-possession, gave her hand to each of the men in turn, Colt's thoughts were racing madly about in search of some connecting link. He had felt for the last half hour that he was on the verge of a definite discovery. What had been only formless suspicion until this last death were taking definite, clear-cut shapes in his mind. And he could scarcely repress a shudder at what they appeared to reveal.

"Well, I must be getting on," Doctor Dayton's cheery voice interrupted his ruminations. "So long, Colt! See you later, Flynn. Have my report late to-night or first thing in the morning. Good-by, Mrs. Ribbelsdale." He disappeared into the hall and the door was heard to close after him.

It may have been the bang of that door, which led Colt's perplexed brain to function with such rapid clarity. At any rate, simultaneously with

the doctor's departure, a rift was torn in the clouds of mystery which had enveloped his inquiries. His excited thoughts literally leaped to their feet, but Colt sat quietly in his chair, and merely said gently:

"I've been an inordinate ass . . ."

"Glad you agree with the whole town," grunted Flynn, derisively. "The papers are just waiting for a chance to leap on us. If old Pulver could hear the gossip his few remaining hairs would stand straight on end. But now we're in . . ."

"Now you're in, things will commence to hum. Exactly," agreed Colt just a shade too sweetly.

But before his colleague could retort, he turned to Suzanne.

"We must have a talk with Miss Wilder, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. I suggest that you call up her friends and send out a regular searching party. And perhaps you'll unearth our errant Jimmy at the same time. Methinks . . ."

A dark flush covered Suzanne's face and neck. For an instant her eyes gleamed. But the gleam vanished as quickly as it had come.

"I'm only too glad to be of any help I can, Mr. Colt," she assured him most graciously. "But you must be patient with me about this. Dorcas is a strange girl. She may actually have run away from sheer fright."

"Fright," snapped Flynn. "What do you mean by 'fright'?"

"Why," stammered Suzanne, with evident embarrassment. "Why, I didn't mean anything much. Only we're all nervous. We none of us know when it will be our turn. This house has become like a perpetual tomb. I wouldn't blame Dorcas if she's run away. . . ."

Suzanne left the room.

Flynn's eyes had narrowed into a mere slit. He seemed to be thinking hard. Colt's thoughts, too, were filled with a thousand questionings.

"Who did you say found those 'Cynthia' letters, Colt?" asked Flynn.

"I did."

"You! Hell! Well, that upsets that!"

"Quite so," Colt grinned appreciatively. "I've started down a hundred paths which lead to the same blockade, Flynn."

"Got the letters anywhere about?"

"They're at my office. Locked up. I'm still trying to trace the lady. I think I came on a clue just now. When Dr. Dayton slammed the front door, you know . . ."

"When he slammed the door, I suppose a little birdie whispered in your ear . . ."

Flynn snorted derisively.

"Something like that, old dear. You see, the

woman's writing puzzled me. She purported to be a sort of Cleopatra and she wrote like a High School Sophomore who is taking the Commercial course. Old Mrs. Ribbelsdale smelt a rat too. But she couldn't put her finger on it. Neither could I, blithering idiot that I was . . ."

"Delighted to hear you use the past tense, my boy. Perhaps you'll hand over the goods which the little fairy ? . . ."

"Don't try to be funny, Flynn. It isn't your style." Colt assumed a patronizing air. "I'm about to elucidate. Fact. All you need is patience."

"Strikes me there's been nothing but patience working on this case," grunted Flynn. "The whole shebang going to sleep."

"True, true," murmured Colt, dreamily. "It may be you or me next, dear friend. Anyone who knows too much . . . sleep the eternal silencer, sleep, sudden and sure . . . sleep . . ."

"My God!" the Inspector jumped to his feet. "You get on my nerves! Talk some sense, can't you?"

"Quite." Colt paused impressively. "There is no such person as 'Cynthia.'"

"What the devil!" Inspector Flynn started to bluster, when Detective Miles followed by the official photographer entered the room on their

way to the door. The Inspector bit his lip and then turned to his colleagues.

"Anything new?" he demanded.

"Nope. Of course, the room's full of finger prints. We've taken some dozen of negatives, but I should judge the very profligacy of 'em would rob 'em of any value."

"Took the impressions of the corpse's?"

"Yes, sir. And tried to get the boy's, but he slammed the door in my face." Miles grimaced.

"You should have left that to me. They're a touchy bunch here. All sort of suspecting each other," Flynn said.

"Well, so long. We're going on back, Inspector."

With a nod for Colt, the two men turned toward the door, just as Inspector Flynn seemed to make a sudden decision.

"Hey, wait a sec," he called after them. "Give the Assistant and me a lift." He turned to Colt and spoke in an undertone. "Come down to my place, will you? We're being overheard here, I'd swear, though how, why or by whom I can only guess."

"Right." Colt walked to the hall and rescued his hat which he had thrown down upon his hasty entrance. As the heavy front door closed behind them, Colt had difficulty in repressing a shudder,

so strongly had the idea of an evil spirit taken hold of his imagination. Even when he looked back at the rising driveway to the sturdy red brick house, so indigenous in its colonial simplicity; the quiet serenity of the small estate, the gorgeousness of the autumnal foliage, the obvious tranquillity of the well-bred neighborhood could not entirely dispel his sense of intangible evil.

As soon as they were seated in the Inspector's office, Flynn reverted to the subject of Cynthia.

"What was that you said, Colt, when Miles and Frank butted in? I've been wondering ever since if I got you right."

"I fancy you did. I said, there is no such person as Cynthia."

"Then what's all the gaff you've been blowing about the dame? Come, don't be so phony, youngster. You'll get my dander up. Who the devil wrote all those letters you were talking about if it wasn't this Cynthia?"

"Um . . . I'm not sure, but I wouldn't be surprised if you'd find that Mrs. Suzanne Ribbelsdale knows more than she's telling."

"What do you mean, more than she's telling?"

"I've been reconstructing in my mind the discovery of those letters. Young Mrs. Ribbelsdale and I were fingering around the desk. Now I look back at it, I believe she ingeniously maneu-

vered me into the exact position where I was certain to light on that secret drawer. I felt from the first that there was something fishy about the whole business. That even schoolgirl handwriting was perplexing. Now it's no longer perplexing. I can explain it . . . I . . ."

"Well?"

"I can say with assurance that it was *disguised*."

"What? Disguised? What for?"

"That's a facer!" Colt grinned. "Your turn, Flynn. You're a practiced hand. Why was it disguised? I tumbled to the fact it was. Now you tell us why."

"Stop your nonsense, Colt," Flynn tried to speak solemnly. "Lives may be at stake."

"Let's hope they lay off for to-day. Well then, as you can't tell me why the lady's writing was disguised, *I'll tell you*. It was because someone who was likely to see the letters would have been familiar with the natural writing of the person who was corresponding with David Ribbelsdale."

Flynn frowned. Then his puzzled expression gave way to a sudden light. "You mean if some woman whose writing was known to, say, the young widow, wrote those letters to her husband, she would have taken a false name and disguised her writing so's not to be caught . . . ?"

"Something like that."

"Say, if that's so, then there isn't any Cynthia! You've been hunting for somebody who doesn't exist. Ha! Ha! That's one on you, Colt!"

"You seem vastly pleased at your own cleverness. Did you or I first tumble to it? 'One on me,' you say! Bah!"

"'At a boy! Give him Hell!' chuckled a gruff voice. A red-haired freckled face protruded in the door which had been half opened. "I came around to see if you'd anything worth printing in the *News*. We've just time to slip in the latest dope. Made any arrests yet?"

"Get out of here, Stevens! We're busy." Flynn greeted the reporter good-naturedly. "Tell your editor that we've just come upon a bunch of new and important clues and that an arrest is expected any minute."

"Say, that's what you told me last night. Can't you think up nothing new?"

"That's your business, not ours," said Colt, as he pushed the red-head back through the door and closed it. "So he was around here last night?"

"Sure. The whole town's been jawing about it ever since that maid found young Ribbelsdale dead. I let them think we were working together. No sense letting any tales get started."

"Say, Flynn, you're a sport. I appreciate it, I can tell you." Colt shook the elder man's hand.

"I've been crazy to try my hand at a real mystery, but I don't mind admitting this one's gotten my goat. If you're game, from here on, we work hand in hand."

"That's all right, boy. You can do a lot I can't. Get into the family life at the house, I mean, and such dope. If you'll leave the details of the case with me, I'll go over them while you see the doctor. Then you can stop back this way or come around to my place after supper and give me the dope. I've an idea that maybe if you can get the doctor and your friend, Jimmy Armstrong, to tell what they know, we won't be far from the guilty party."

"Of course you think it's an inside job?"

"I do." The Inspector answered emphatically. "And I think you'll find there's a personal motive, maybe jealousy, at the back of it. There were too many pretty females under one roof, with only one man between them."

"It wasn't that there were so many handsome women, Inspector, but that there weren't enough handsome men," said Colt, as he took leave of the Inspector and set out to keep his appointment with Dr. Scofield.

CHAPTER NINE

A NURSE in the uniform of her profession opened the solid door of the brown stone house in answer to Colt's ring.

"Yes, Dr. Scofield is expecting you," she said. "This way, please."

She led him through the empty waiting room into the inner sanctorum of the doctor. It was obvious that Dr. Scofield had been eagerly awaiting him. At Colt's entrance, he jumped with alacrity to his feet and came forward, hand extended.

"You did what you could for me, Colt," he said. "Now I propose to repay you in full measure."

"Rather cryptic, what?" Colt retorted with a smile as he grasped the extended hand. "Let's get down to business. The atmosphere of that Ribbedsdale house is beginning to get on my nerves, doctor. I'm imagining all manner of hideous things about its inmates."

Dr. Scofield nodded his head gravely. His eyes were very sad. But, with a determined effort, he began to speak.

"I asked you around here to-night to tell you, first, that about a fortnight ago I had my medicine case stolen from my car. My chauffeur had been ill and I had driven the car around myself. I thought little of it at the time. Such things occasionally happen to any doctor. Addicts ravenous for their drugs won't stop at anything to obtain them. But this *was* a bit unusual. That is none of the ordinary drugs were touched. Only a tiny phial containing small white tablets similar to morphia was missing."

"Hyoscine . . ." There was no inflection in Colt's voice. It was a simple and gentle statement of fact.

Dr. Scofield started. "You know!"

Colt nodded.

Suddenly the doctor's expression changed from one of resignation to one of anger.

"Then why the devil are you here? Why have you come to torment me in my grief? Go! I beg of you, go . . ." He threw out his hand with an abandon which touched Colt.

"I'm sorry if I've hurt you. I only meant I knew about the hyoscine. Anyone could have tumbled to the cause of all this sudden sleep."

"You understand the drug then?" The doctor spoke eagerly as if anxious to avoid other imminent topics.

"Somewhat. I know it produces analgesia and amnesia . . . and death."

"Nothing else?"

"I didn't come here for a medical examination, doctor," Colt smiled, "but I don't mind telling you that I know enough about hyoscine for the purpose, and so does our dear Medical Examiner Dr. Dayton, for that matter. . . ."

"Ah . . . then I could have done nothing . . ."

"You could have saved Mrs. Ribbelsdale, Dr. Scofield, and by being entirely frank now you may save the third." Colt spoke crisply. "You are certain, in your own mind, I take it, that David Ribbelsdale as well as his mother died from the effect of hyoscine poisoning?"

The doctor nodded miserably.

"You saw, as well as I, the dilation of the eye pupils?"

Dr. Scofield nodded assent.

"How much of the stuff did you lose?"

"About twenty milligrammes . . ."

"Good God! And the maximum dose of hyoscine hydrobromide down in the books is six tenths of a milligramme!"

Dr. Scofield solemnly nodded.

"Good heavens! There's a fiend at large with enough in his possession to kill twenty or more people, and you can only sit and nod!"

"And if I tell you who I think is guilty?" Dr. Scofield flushed darkly. "You will listen to me?"

"You win, doctor!" Colt reflected for an instant. "You use a needle in twilight sleep cases, don't you?"

"Yes."

"But the tablets you lost were for administration by mouth? Quite tasteless little things?"

"Of one tenth grain each. No bigger than a pinhead."

"They could be slipped unnoticed into a drink?"

"Easily. They are quite tasteless. Hyoscine is a colorless transparent crystal in its more natural state but it is made up with a powder and has the appearance of a morphia pill . . ."

"You want me to believe that it might have been mistaken for morphia? That it might have been taken to relieve pain?"

"It was plainly marked." The doctor spoke firmly.

Colt brightened visibly. He had been sparring, unable to fathom the doctor's tardy confession. But the older man seemed to be emerging from his grief and taking a firmer hold on the matter.

"Plainly marked . . ." Dr. Scofield reiterated. "And it disappeared, not from my car, as I said, but during a visit to the Ribbelsdale home . . ."

"A fortnight ago?"

"Longer . . . much longer ago . . ."

"When the baby was born? When you were attending young Mrs. Ribbelsdale?"

The doctor nodded.

"Deliberate, premeditated murder . . . and you knew it! And still you tried to shield the criminal!" Colt turned accusingly on the doctor, who drew himself up with dignity.

"It is not for you to criticize my motives. I did what I did because I could do nothing else. I did not guess . . . I could not foresee . . . I was confused by those letters from that strange woman. That was where I made my mistake."

"Your mistake . . . ?"

"Those letters were forgeries. That is another thing I asked you here to tell you."

"Forgeries?" returned Colt with surprise. "How can that be? What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. There was no woman in David Ribbelsdale's life but his wife, whom he loved."

Colt shifted restlessly in his chair. The business wasn't getting forward as he had anticipated. When all was said and done, the doctor had added little to what he already knew.

"You know the Ribbelsdale family. I don't. Who could have desired the death of David and his mother?"

"I am not an officer of the law," answered the doctor, gently.

"I stand corrected. Still I have a grievance, Dr. Scofield. Why did you tell me there was no other woman in David Ribbelsdale's life but his wife? To avoid more family scandal?"

"To save another woman's life, if possible . . ."

"You think that Dorcas Wilder . . ."

Dr. Scofield raised his hand with a grim dignity. "I have told you that I am not a officer of the law. I have told you all I know. Conjectures are out of place under these circumstances." He rose with an air of dismissal.

Colt rose, too.

"Then you won't tell me what you suspect? What you fear?" Colt made a final appeal. "You don't quite trust me yet! Isn't that it?"

"You are very young . . . or you seem so to one of my age . . . You have the impetuosity of youth. This is a moment for careful stepping. Death . . . the gallows . . . they are fearful things to speak of . . ."

"But we *must* think of them, Dr. Scofield," said Colt. "Won't you, can't you, put your cards on the table?"

"My hands are tied. I have told you all I *know*."

Colt made no further effort. With an outward

show of indifference he took his leave silently, but he was cursing when he reached the street. He had failed. The doctor hadn't fully trusted him.

That started a new train of thought. The doctor hadn't fully trusted him? That was assuredly the impression he had taken pains to convey. But why? Why, after all, at this stage of affairs, should he be so reticent? Did he, himself, perhaps have something to hide?

Once started on that train of thought, Colt went ahead by leaps and bounds. Glaringly, things he had scarcely noticed, stood out in his mind and took their places. He recalled vividly the appeal Dr. Scofield had made to his finer feelings when he had stepped to the window and drawn back the curtain to reveal to Colt the children of David Ribbelsdale so happily playing in the garden, so oblivious of the tragedy overhanging their home. Colt had thought at the time that the appeal was really made for the sake of those helpless infants. But now a doubt obtruded itself. Could it not as well have been made because of a personal necessity to prevent Dr. Dayton from examining the body? Colt pursed his lips. What possible motive could a respectable middle-aged doctor have for killing the two Ribbelsdales? None. No, surely not. Colt pondered stubbornly on. Could there be any possible connection between these

murders and the old love affair, if old love affair there had been?

"Damn!" muttered Colt, as he turned his steps toward his office. "If I don't get next to something soon Flynn and his bunch will have the laugh on me, and Pulver will raise Hell because he wasn't notified. And the newspapers!" he wiped his forehead, on which perspiration gathered at the thought. He knew that revenge was sweet. Hadn't he sought to revenge himself on the District Attorney by a coup in his absence? And how the boys on the *Daily Herald* and *Evening Bulletin* would rejoice at a chance to wipe the ground up with him.

In the midst of his self derision, he, for no reason at all, thought of an ad he had seen recently in several papers. He couldn't remember what cigarette it purported to pass off as the best. That didn't matter in the least, as Rodney Colt only smoked cigars. What did matter, was that he wasn't taking the advice so freely offered by the advertiser. "When in a tight place, don't get flustered. Be nonchalant. Light a ——!" Colt took out one of his thin Havanas, and was smoking airily with such a beatific expression on his face when he entered the office, that Apollo was certain that his boss had cornered the guilty man at last.

CHAPTER TEN

RODNEY COLT left the office late. He had reviewed all the evidence so far gathered, and arranged and rearranged it. It all pointed to a woman. There had been four women in the red brick house on the hill, four in addition to the maids. One of these was now dead. That left Suzanne Ribbelsdale, Dorcas Wilder, and Made-moiselle Félicité Monot.

But what motive could any of the three have for murdering David Ribbelsdale? It was there that Colt met his Waterloo. One must have a motive, a strong motive. One didn't just go around murdering people for amusement even in this jaded age.

He took Suzanne first for his scrutiny. Wives had been known to rid themselves of their husbands . . . because they wanted another man. But such murders rarely occurred in the circles in which Suzanne moved. Divorce was so easy, so common, as to create only slight gossip. And David Ribbelsdale, he knew, was a proud man. He wouldn't be likely to coerce a wife into remain-

ing a wife, if she wished to be rid of him. And even presupposing some such a situation, where was the other man? Dr. Scofield and Jimmy were the only men whom Colt had ever encountered at the red brick house on the hill. Dr. Scofield? Hardly. Colt smiled to himself. Jimmy? Possibly . . . yes, quite possibly. He suddenly recalled glances he had intercepted. "'Um . . . But if Suzanne had killed her husband so that she could marry Jimmy, why in the name of four-faced Shiva had she sent Jimmy running to him? Had she spotted him for a poor fool? Had she fancied that she would indeed be safe if he was in charge? Had it been deliberately planned to happen during the annual absence of District Attorney Pulver?"

Colt mentally docketed Suzanne for further attention.

Then he turned his attention to Dorcas Wilder. From the first he had so succumbed to her charm that he had to fight against the bias it gave his judgment. If Jimmy's plans had not miscarried, he would see her soon, talk with her. Jimmy had said he would come to the house early to-night and bring Dorcas Wilder, if she would come . . . if they had found her. Of course they had! The Inspector would never have rested until he knew where every person connected with the tragedy

was. Colt had to admit to himself a grudging admiration for the common-sense efficiency of his colleague.

But to get his thoughts back to Dorcas Wilder: it was Mademoiselle Félicité who had sown the first seed of suspicion, wasn't it? Yet it seemed years. The funny foreign intonation of Félicité's voice had rung in his ears ever since. But it was what she had said that had troubled him. She had told him that this exquisite proud creature had come running up the driveway in the middle of the night . . . running like a fugitive to her sister's home. And almost certainly, unless the French woman had lied, Dorcas Wilder had seen her brother-in-law that night.

Colt shrugged his shoulders and smiled grimly. Wasn't it always the come-hither women who made the murderesses? And what possible motive could the French woman have had for lying? None, unless she herself were guilty. But he hadn't come to her yet. He must finish with Dorcas Wilder before he confronted her and Jimmy to-night.

His pace had not been rapid, but he was now almost home. He had gone over all the ground of this so often that it seemed futile to do it again. Yet he had never been able to find any reasonable explanation for Dorcas Wilder's creeping into the house in the wee small hours. It wasn't a squeam-

ish family. Nor a squeamish neighborhood. Parties usually ended late, and she was dressed in "party" clothes, Félicité had said.

However he tried, Colt couldn't get away from the fact that Dorcas Wilder had lied to him. She had denied all knowledge of the events of that fatal night. She had said that she was in her room, asleep.

There must have been some motive for the lie.

"Hi, Rod!" a shout intruded at this moment. "What the devil are you walking for? Jump in! We've come to call, and you don't want to be a tardy host."

Jimmy drew his roadster up alongside the curb. Dorcas Wilder was sitting beside him. She greeted Colt with a friendly smile. Certainly she didn't look like a murderess.

"You'll have to crowd a bit," said Jimmy. "They advertise this as ample room for three . . . ample's a good word, what?"

Colt climbed into the car and closed the door. Before anyone could speak again they were drawing up in front of the old Colt house.

Rodney preceded the others. His key easily admitted them, and he ushered them into the dark front room, turning on a lamp and endeavoring to maneuver them into the light. This, he had read, was the thing to do. At least in books.

But it seemed that for this once Jimmy was intent on running the party. He had taken Dorcas's hand and drawn it through his arm. Now he held her off at arm's length toward the astonished friend and host.

"Meet my wife, Rod, and hear our story! And disburse yourself of all those unjust suspicions, old bean!"

"I say," gasped Colt. "This is a surprise. I congratulate you, Jimmy! And I hope for your sake, your wife won't ever find you out!"

Colt was grinning like a fatuous ass. Everything had of a sudden become clear. This explained things. The sulky malicious attitude of Suzanne, the story of Félicité, the . . . Well, not quite all, perhaps. But Colt felt for the first time that he was actually on the last lap of the gruesome business.

"Sit down, won't you? I'll just get Sampson to bring in some refreshments. What'll you have?"

"Nothing, really, Rod," protested Jimmy, who had seen a look of such misery pass over his beloved's face as almost to frighten him. "We just want to get this over with. Some other time . . ."

"You're darn right. There could be more propitious circumstances. It's a blinking shame you two had to run into all this just at this time, of all others."

A slight shudder passed over Dorcas, but she did not speak. She had kept her eyes lowered through all the talk.

"It's been pretty horrible, Rod," Jimmy plunged into his yarn. "We planned it secretly, because we felt that Suzanne . . . that she wouldn't quite approve . . ."

"Why on earth not? Her sister and her husband's partner?"

"Well, she's been pretending that she believed that Dorcas and David . . . that is . . . of course, there was absolutely nothing in it. They were awfully fond of each other and all that sort of thing . . ."

"I've always thought David was a dear," said Dorcas. "And I pitied him, in a way."

"You see," went on Jimmy, eagerly, "she thought that David wasn't happy. That . . . or lots of things . . ."

"But I don't see, Jimmy, what that had to do with you . . . I mean with your marrying Dorcas. Why should you have thought Suzanne would object? Did she ever say anything . . . ?"

"Not in so many words. Women are subtle creatures, Rod. You don't know 'em even as well as I do. But that can't have anything to do with the murders . . . Let's get back to the main facts . . ."

"It's often the littlest, seemingly most irrelevant things . . ."

"Oh, keep quiet, Sherlock!" For the first time that evening Jimmy grinned. "Dorcas is much nearer to this than we are. She's had to live in that house." His voice became troubled. "I've begged her to let me announce our marriage, and to come to me . . . but she feels that she shouldn't leave Peter."

"If I may, I want to ask Mrs. Armstrong several quesitons. I think she may be of great help to me, if she will answer fully and frankly." Colt turned to Dorcas.

"I will tell you anything I can," she said simply.

"When you returned from your . . . that is when you left Jimmy, you came running up to the side entrance which leads to your brother-in-law's study. You went in by that door. You turned up the light in his room." Colt paused, then added very softly: "Was Mr. Ribbelsdale dead when you saw him then?"

Dorcas shrank back, so slightly that Colt wondered if he had imagined it. But she answered quietly and frankly.

"He was dead . . . I don't know how you know what I did that night, but you are quite correct. I came back that way because that is the door I left unlocked that night. I saw David's car in the

driveway. I was surprised, but glad, because I wanted to tell him . . . about Jimmy and me, I mean."

"You saw his car . . . but his study was dark. You had to turn up the light. Did Mr. Ribbelsdale often sit in his study late at night?"

"You see, he . . ." she hesitated. "He sometimes drank a good deal. He had been drinking that night. The siphon and glass were beside him . . . when I saw him . . ."

"You removed them?"

"It is strange you ask that . . . I did start to take them away. Suzanne would be so angry with David, if she knew he was drunk." Again Dorcas hesitated, then continued slowly. "But just as I started to pick them up, I bent over to kiss him. I was so sorry for him—in my happiness, I mean. It was then I guessed he—was—dead . . ."

"You guessed he was dead?" Colt's eyebrows went up. "You mean you realized that he had been murdered?" Colt watched her very closely.

"Yes, I think I knew it then—I can't explain why."

"What did you do then?"

"I left everything just as it was. I've read that the police insist that nothing be touched. I touched nothing . . . just put out the light, and slipped up to my room."

"Did you meet anyone, or hear anything?"

Dorcas's eyes became suddenly wide.

"It was as if the house were alive," she spoke with difficulty. "Everywhere there were faint sounds, like ghostly steps, then like breathing. Once I thought someone was breathing in the same room with me. That was in the music room. I ran as fast as I could. I was so frightened." She paused. "I still feel that about the house. That it is alive. That it has eyes which are always watching, watching . . . Even here . . ." She turned apprehensively toward the windows. At the tightly drawn curtains, her face became more calm.

"What is it you are afraid of?" asked Colt, in as matter-of-fact a way as he could.

Dorcas folded and unfolded her hands before replying. Her delicate handkerchief she had already rolled into a ball.

"I don't know . . ." She lifted misty troubled eyes to Colt's intent gaze. "It's like the evil eye people used to believe in . . ."

"You mean magic?" Colt asked, his tone amused.

"Something like that. Not quite tangible, but none the less real . . ."

"Yet," Colt spoke very quietly, "it was something very real which killed both David Ribbels-

dale and his mother. It was a deadly poison."

"But . . . I thought . . ."

Colt watched her closely.

"I say, Rod, I won't have you badgering my brand new wife," protested Jimmy, indignantly.

"We came of our own free will to try to help you. No, old man, you can't put us through your third degree!"

"And he knew everything that we came to tell him." Dorcas spoke almost bitterly.

"Except for your marriage, I must admit that I did. But that's neither here nor there. I still have a question or two to put to Mrs. Armstrong, and I'll let you both go. You were good to come."

"Shut up!" Jimmy's voice was irritable. "What in hell could we do but come?"

"Tell me, Mrs. Armstrong," Colt turned to Dorcas, ignoring Jimmy's rudeness. "Did your brother Peter see or hear you that night?"

"I . . . don't . . . know . . ."

"You mean he hasn't mentioned it to you?"

"Yes," Dorcas still spoke with an effort. "Yes, that's what I mean."

"Don't you think you could influence Peter to be frank with me?" Colt continued. "I shall feel happier and so will you all, when this ghastly business is cleared up. Reservations such as you and Jimmy have indulged in only hinder things. Now

you've come forward. Do you think Peter would do the same?"

"I don't know. Peter is pretty miserable. I'm afraid for him . . ."

"Afraid for him?"

"Oh, not that he'll be murdered, but that he might harm himself. He's always been sensitive and morbid and all this has made him more so than ever."

Colt nodded gravely. "I think I understand."

"Well," Jimmy burst in. "I'm damn—beg pardon, Dorcas—I'm darn glad if *you* understand . . . That's all I can say. *I don't!*"

"I think you two children had better run along and rest," said Colt paternally. "The house is being watched inside and out from now on. I don't think a flea could get away with murder when old Flynn's men are on the job. So you can both sleep with your eyes closed to-night."

He rose. Jimmy took Dorcas's arm and drew her close. There were many things he didn't understand, but then Jimmy didn't ask to understand. He only asked to be allowed to stand by, ready to protect those whom he loved.

When he had found Dorcas after an hour of unrewarded search, she had been curled up in the densest part of the garden, asleep against the trunk of a large oak. She had resembled nothing

so much as a tired baby. Jimmy couldn't forget that first glance. Dorcas had awakened almost at once and opened startled eyes to his. But all Jimmy's sense of failure in that instant changed to a determination to protect this new wife of his. He had come to believe that everyone in the house was under a sort of fear that the death blow might fall on any of them. Something of the fear of the others had entered into his soul. And he had been more relieved than he could say at Colt's reassuring words. Thank God, men, sturdy men, would guard his darling through the night. He felt quite maudlin in his relief.

"Your assurance is almost a warning," Dorcas was saying to Colt. "Why?"

"That is for you to answer . . . as you will . . ." Colt bowed, and took her extended hand. He opened the door wide, and as they left, his hand for an instant rested on Jimmy's shoulder. It was a gesture of unusual affection coming from Rodney Colt.

"Good night!" he said aloud, and added to himself, "Poor Peter . . . with so ghastly a secret, no wonder you have almost lost your mind."

THURSDAY
OCTOBER TWENTY-FIFTH

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHEN Rodney Colt reached his office on the following morning he knew at once by Apollo's familiar manner that someone of importance must be waiting.

"Who is it, Belvedere?"

"The widdler herself, sir, and she's in sich a rat as you never seen."

Colt hurried into the inner room. Suzannie Ribbelsdale rose at his entrance. Her singularly clear blue eyes were veiled by the tiny brim of her smart black hat. She had loosened the silver fox fur she wore and it hung low on her shoulders, revealing the well-tailored line of the simple black cheviot suit coat. Her blouse alone showed a touch of color in the delicate shell pink tint of its soft crêpe.

Colt knew at once that she was agitated, though she greeted him with the same gallant smile as on former occasions. She fumbled with her bag and, extracting with some difficulty a letter it contained, held it out to him.

"It came this morning . . . And I brought it

at once to you . . .” Suzanne’s voice had a personal quality that was flattering to either sex. A flush came into her pale face.

“It isn’t from Cynthia?” Colt spoke in evident amazement.

Suzanne nodded.

Colt took the letter and regarded it with mingled curiosity and perplexity. It was of a heavy rough-finish and cream color. He instinctively raised the flap. There was the tiny mark; the same: “Tiffany, New York.” The postmark was of the evening before. But it was not New York this time, but New Haven, Connecticut.

Colt whistled. He could feel Suzanne’s eyes intent on him, as he drew out the letter and opened it. There across one corner was engraved “CYNTHIA,” and it was written in the same pale lavender ink . . . and the same disguised script.

“The lady appears to be getting nearer,” Colt remarked. “I see she has come as far as New Haven.” He started to read. His eyebrows were considerably raised when he finished.

“Of all the cool nerve . . . I say, you haven’t let this frighten you, have you?” he turned to Suzanne anxiously.

“No . . .” she shook her head dubiously. “I don’t really believe she’d *dare* with all your men guarding the house . . . still . . .”

"Still, one never knows," Colt finished. "Although I must admit I don't understand why she should want to dispose of you . . ." He looked at Suzanne searchingly. "You're sure you have no idea who she might be? That might explain her interest in you . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean . . . I thought you might have some idea . . ."

Suzanne shuddered visibly. "Don't . . . don't . . ." she whispered.

Colt turned again to the letter he was still holding.

"She doesn't choose to be very definite, does she? Not much to go on . . ."

"I thought . . . the postmark . . ." Suzanne, with an effort, recovered her poise. "I had heard how wonderfully the detective system was linked throughout the whole country . . . New Haven is so near . . ."

"You know that struck me at once . . . The curious proximity of Cynthia's hiding-place, I mean . . . It would be so easy for her to slip back and forth from here . . ."

Suzanne paled at some secret thought. She hesitated, then said:

"Dorcas and I were in New Haven yesterday afternoon . . . We went down for the ride . . ."

Suzanne knit her brow. She seemed to be trying to work out something.

"Was Peter with you?"

"Yes . . . and Mademoiselle Monot and the children. We sort of do everything together. That Irish detective told us it was safer . . ." Suddenly Suzanne drew herself up. Some of her old energy returned. "I don't like the way things are dragging along," she said. "You've managed to convince me . . . or rather poor grandmother Edith's death convinced me . . . that we have a cold-blooded murderer to deal with, one who will stop at nothing . . . then this morning, right in my own home, I receive that threatening letter . . . the police seem impotent . . . *You* aren't much better . . . The time to speak frankly has come, Mr. Colt! I have my babies to think of. My life isn't my own to lose . . . not that I pretend to be very brave by now . . . I've gone through too much . . ." Her voice broke on an hysterical sob. Her eyes were full of tears.

"You're right, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. Perfectly right. I'm a stupid bungler, and the rest of them haven't proved much better. Do you want me to summon Pulver home?"

"Pulver? Who is Pulver?" Now that Suzanne's outburst was finished, she was peculiarly quiet.

"My superior. But, of course, you wouldn't know." Colt grinned ruefully. He was finding it difficult to do strenuous thinking and at the same time appear to be without a thought in his head. He knew that Suzanne was watching him with eager attention, and he didn't want to fail her expectations.

"What do you say that we, you and I, go to New Haven in search of this woman?" he offered.

"Just the thing!" Suzanne's eyes suddenly gleamed. Again Colt was struck by their opalescent blueness. "I had wanted to suggest it myself. It's terrible for me . . . being so inactive, I mean. And I never feel really *safe* . . ."

"It must be ghastly," assented Colt sympathetically.

"And this morning . . . when that letter came . . . I actually felt as if Cynthia was in the room . . . watching . . . waiting . . ."

"Come!" cautioned Colt, sharply. "You mustn't let yourself go! You'll be all over the place, if you do. You've been wonderfully courageous up until now . . . all I ask is that you hold out a little longer . . ."

"A little longer," Suzanne eagerly repeated. "Then you really are doing something . . . You really have some suspicions . . ."

"We've been working certainly. Mostly just routine, so far. But it all fits."

Suzanne started and bent anxiously forward. "Tell me," she begged.

Colt waved his hand deprecatingly. "It's nothing much to tell. We found footprints in the grass outside Mr. Ribbelsdale's study door corresponding to the size of the shoe Cynthia"—Colt paused over the name—"wrote about in one of those previous letters. We're also on the track of the maid she sent to Tiffany's. Flynn's a thorough old bird, you see."

"Yes," assented Suzanne slowly. "I see" She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, I can't bear it! I can't bear it!" she moaned.

"How long have you suspected . . . ?"

"Oh, I don't know what you mean! I don't know what you mean!"

Suzanne rose and came to Colt's side. Her slender figure drooped pitifully. Certainly her despair was genuine, Colt told himself.

"What would you do, Mr. Colt, if your conscience told you that you must search out the truth, that it was your duty to face it, yet you felt it was leading you . . . leading you . . . Oh, I won't say it! But is there any trust from the dead which demands we betray the living?"

Her mouth trembled. "I should never have let

Jimmy go to you in the first place. Then dear grandmother Edith would be still alive . . . and all this danger, this uncertainty . . . would have been spared us . . . Oh, I suppose anything is better than this *not knowing!* We can't meet each other's eyes at home. We suspect an accomplice everywhere . . . It's absurd, impossible . . . but . . . but . . . I've been wondering and wondering if those letters were ever written by Cynthia."

"What on earth do you mean?" gasped Colt, in genuine astonishment.

"Just that, Mr. Colt," Suzanne walked impatiently up and down the confined space. Colt had risen when she did and stood unobtrusively at one side. "From the first, you . . . and grandmother Edith . . . sensed something queer about those letters. That set me thinking. Then it suddenly came to me what was wrong with them. The handwriting didn't agree with the personality . . . psychological caligraphy and all that was missing. It gave me a frightful jolt, I can tell you . . . and now this letter again this morning. Why to me, unless they . . . she . . . he . . . suspects I suspect them . . . ?"

"My dear young lady, your perspicacity is amazing! I'm overwhelmed! I feel like turning the case over to you!"

"Why are you trying to be funny?" Suzanne asked. "This doesn't seem to me the time for facetiousness."

She had retreated a step when she spoke and she now stood eying him gravely.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Ribbelsdale . . . It was inexcusable . . . Chagrin that you had made as much progress as I. My house of cards fell with a thud. I'd been congratulating myself on my brain work because I tumbled to the disguise of that handwriting, and lo! You in the midst of your grief and fright had done as much!"

"Perhaps grief and fright sharpen one's wits, Mr. Colt," returned Suzanne, appeased by his humility.

"Yet you won't voice your suspicions?"

"What makes you think I have suspicions to voice?" parried Suzanne.

"My dear young woman, haven't you just proven, indisputably proven that you have brains? Of course, you have suspicions, and strong ones, if I mistake not."

"I have . . ." Suzanne spoke very softly. Colt waited breathless. "But until I have positive proof that I'm right, I shan't tell."

"But something might happen to you."

"That is a risk I must take. Even that would be better than accusing the wrong person . . ."

Suzanne spoke bravely. She threw her head up almost defiantly, but Colt thought he detected fear in her blue eyes.

"You're a sport, Mrs. Ribbelsdale, and you can count on me to get through with this gruesome business just as soon as it's humanly possible. I've ten days work to crowd into one, to-day. But tomorrow morning I'll make that trip to New Haven with you. Not to find the unknown . . . but to ascertain what the other three adults of your party were doing there yesterday afternoon . . ."

"I've thought of that, Mr. Colt," Suzanne shook her head dubiously. "It couldn't have been any of them . . . thank God! . . . We left a good three hours before the postmark on that envelope."

"That is a difficulty . . . and the very reason why I don't think the solution will be found outside of New Haven. You see, your name on the envelope, a name which is known by now to every newspaper reader in America . . ."—Suzanne winced, but Colt continued imperturbably—"precludes it having been handed to someone to drop in a mail box later. It's a mystery, I grant. But don't let's jump to any conclusions. I'd hate to send you home with any deeper suspicion of your own household than you had when you came here."

"I try to be strong . . . I feel it would be

disastrous if anyone suspected I was afraid . . . I only dare let you see . . .” Suzanne raised appealing eyes to Colt. “You couldn’t double the guard for to-night, could you? It’s the night I dread the most.”

“Yet it was broad daylight when your mother-in-law . . .”

“That’s what’s so terribly uncanny. But I mustn’t let myself think about it, or I’ll go mad!” Suzanne tried to smile courageously. “I don’t suppose you’ve had a report from the doctors . . . what poison it was, I mean . . .”

“Yes . . . I got it before leaving home this morning. It was undoubtedly hyoscine.”

“Hyoscine? What I took when the baby came? But I didn’t know it would kill you? I thought it was only to numb one, so no pain could be felt . . .”

“Like so many poisons, a small dose is curative, while a larger dose kills.” Colt paused reflectively, then added in a casual voice: “Someone at your house must have been interested in hyoscine. There is a big book on it in your husband’s study.”

“On hyoscine?” Suzanne was obviously astonished. “I never saw it!”

“I thought you might have bought it when you had your child . . . There’s nothing especially

compromising in owning a book on Twilight Sleep. It's a pretty ordinary way of making childbirth painless."

Suzanne flushed self-consciously. She seemed anxious to leave, though a moment ago she had seemed reluctant. Colt was searching for the explanation when she extended her hand.

"I've kept you far too long already," she said. "You'll report any further developments, of course?"

"Of course. And if you don't hear from me in the meanwhile, you can expect me to-morrow morning at ten. We'll drive down to New Haven together, and, if you're willing, have lunch there. It will do you good to get entirely away for a few hours."

"Thank you. You're wonderfully kind . . ."

She turned to smile at him over her shoulder.

"Apollo, take Mrs. Ribbelsdale to her car," called Colt, before he closed and locked the door.

Finding himself safe from interruption, Colt stuck his hands deep in his pockets and began slowly pacing the narrow floor, three steps this way, and five that, his thoughts racing.

He had begun to consider himself a master of the art of strategy, but he had now to admit that this encounter had glaringly shown up his lack of subtlety. Here he had dismissed Suzanne, one of

the four suspects, after imparting to her the knowledge that one of the members of the household was suspected. That he, the Assistant, and, at this moment, the Acting District Attorney, should have committed such an unprofessional blunder, appeared unforgivable; moreover, it put at least one member of the suspected household on her guard! It had been Suzanne's statement that she herself did not believe in the authenticity of the Cynthia letters which had betrayed him. She had so impressed him by her straightforwardness that he had felt she deserved confidence in return.

Rodney Colt had gone to bed on the previous night well satisfied with the case he had built against Suzanne Ribbelsdale, though it was built on a flimsy hypothesis. And now he was back again where he had been twenty-four hours ago, where Inspector Flynn and all his crew were. At the house, to be sure. Inside work. But . . . which, oh, which of the possible four?

He looked at the watch on his wrist. In twenty minutes he was due for a conference with his colleagues at the detective bureau. Colt writhed with chagrin. He had anticipated a triumph when he advanced his case against Suzanne Ribbelsdale, but she herself had taken the wind out of his sails.

There was one fact he couldn't get around.

Suzanne Ribbelsdale was *afraid*. There was no

acting about that. Colt knew genuine fear when he saw it, and Suzanne's, despite her effort at concealment, had been real. She was stumbling along in the dark just as he was. Feeling her way haltingly . . . and she'd been darn clever to see through the disguise of Cynthia's handwriting. Of course, if she'd been guilty she might have called that bluff of his to put him off the track. Every act of hers could be explained to fit guilt or innocence, except her fear. Her fear was real. Colt kept coming back to that. And it was a member of her own household whom she feared. That fitted only with innocence.

Colt felt like a pigmy. He had expected to find clear sailing. His theories were all perfect, and he had faith in them. Some people, like Flynn, worked methodically, following clue by clue, inch by inch. But the dogged persistence of that method had no charms for him. He felt he had a flair for detective work, and if one had a flair for a thing, it came somehow easily and naturally.

Could it be Dorcas? Or young Peter? Certainly he had been worried by Dorcas's shilly-shallying. She had avoided issues with consummate art, issues which Suzanne met frankly. But Jimmy's wife!

Perhaps, Colt speculated, the motive lay in the fact that she *was* Jimmy's wife. He recalled the

photograph he had found on the dead man's desk that first morning, the photograph which gave him his first glimpse of Dorcas Wilder. Sparks had passed between Dorcas and Suzanne; Suzanne had been jealous. That might have explained it. Had Dorcas carried on with her brother-in-law, he might have been waiting for her on her return from her marriage to another man, waiting for her, not dead, as she claimed, but alive, jealous and ready to spoil her happiness. That was reason enough for murder.

Colt groaned. If, if, if! Had she? Had she? He dreaded to meet Flynn. Well, he would be as cool as the Inspector, as suave as if he wasn't assailed with doubts. And he'd keep Suzanne's visit and her receipt of a Cynthia letter to himself until after their trip to New Haven. Let Flynn find out what he could in his way, thought Colt viciously. He wouldn't give in.

CHAPTER TWELVE

INSPECTOR FLYNN, quiet and confident as usual, greeted Colt in friendly manner.

"Shut the door and draw up a chair. No use letting the reporters get in on this."

"Then you've made some headway, Flynn?" Colt drew his chair up and leaned across the broad littered desk of the Inspector.

"Yes, and no . . . I'm certainly on the track of something . . . And you? . . ."

Colt grimaced.

"I've been running the gamut of human susceptibility and folly, my dear Flynn. I've been pinning it on the two sisters alternately and surely. Motive and all the rest, don't you know?"

"Who's your present favorite, if I may ask?" Flynn took up the bantering tone.

"I regret to tell you, genuinely regret it, mind you, but it's the wife of my old friend Jimmy that holds the stage at present."

"What! I didn't know Armstrong had a wife!"

"Delighted to see you register surprise, Flynn. I had an idea that I'd discovered one thing you hadn't."

"Yeh," Flynn bit off the end of a cigar. "How'd you discover it, my child?"

"They told me . . . Now don't deny it was my discovery," he waived away the Inspector's protest. "They didn't tell you, remember. It's a way I have with me. People feel like confiding. Witness Mademoiselle Monot, then Dorcas Wilder Armstrong"—Flynn gasped, but Colt continued imperturbably—"and Jimmy, and last but not least the young widow herself. There's only Peter Wilder left, and I expect to hear from him before many days."

"Yeh, and before many days I'll go you one better. I'll have the murderer under lock and key. I'm hot on the trail of one of the leading actors. This Cynthia wasn't the only female who put in an appearance at Tiffany's."

Flynn paused.

"Go on, go on," urged Colt warmly. "This suspense will prove fatal. You've found the maid?"

"Not exactly found her . . . but we're on the track . . ." Flynn walked right into the trap.

"Not found her? Why I thought——"

"Say, quit kidding and let's get down to business. I haven't all day to waste if you have!" The Inspector's assumed chagrin delighted Colt. He had a good deal of humor in him.

"O.K. Come on with your dope. Then I'll spill mine."

"You see," commenced Flynn, "I thought I'd work it from a different angle. You were tackling the problem from the inside. I thought to myself, Why not try the outside? It has all the earmarks of a one-man job. The maid mentioned in Tiffany's letter is probably at this moment having fits, unless she's not heard of the murders, which isn't likely. So I said to myself, 'Flynn, old boy, that maid'll have something to tell you that you'll want to hear. Get the boys working on her.' That's what I've done. I'm after facts . . . just *facts*."

"Well, old bean, I admit brass tacks have a decided lure for me now," Colt conceded with a grin. He told the Inspector the salient points in the visit of Jimmy and Dorcas on the previous night and then that of Suzanne. He had decided a clean breast was only fair. Whatever happened, Colt didn't want any more murders.

"Got the letter with you?" asked Flynn laconically, when Colt had finished.

"Here it is . . ." Colt reluctantly drew it from his pocket.

"Um . . . postmark is genuine, paper's the same . . . Yet there isn't any Cynthia, we've decided . . . and this was posted in New Haven a good three hours after our party left there. Now,

what the hell!" The Inspector leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the edge of his desk. "Now how in the devil was that managed unless the murderer has a confederate in New Haven, or unless we're suckers and it's an outside job, and Cynthia is genuine?"

Colt had been staring dreamily into space.

"Couldn't it have happened if the murderer had timed the collections?" he suggested. "I've an idea that in some parts of New Haven there aren't more than three or four collections made during the day. Now suppose our lady,—let's call her a lady until we discover she isn't,—had taken pains to work out that obvious detail in advance. Then, artless as it would seem, managed to drive by the box and in some manner get that letter posted . . ."

"You may be right at that!" Flynn sat up suddenly. "Take it that any of those four left out there is the guilty one. They all go together to New Haven, and one has this letter all the time, yet contrives to post it in such a manner that Mrs. Ribbelsdale declared to you it couldn't have been posted by one of her party yesterday."

"Did you fancy we were dealing with a moron?" riposted Colt cynically. "And the disconcerting part of it is that if it fits any of the four, it likewise fits any of them equally well."

"But it's all so damn crazy!" Flynn scratched his head. "It's over two years since our friend Cynthia made her first visit to Tiffany's. And all those letters to David Ribbelsdale . . . Could the murders have been contemplated then? Or was the disguise assumed for other reasons, and then used to cloak a murder which later became necessary?" He stopped as if struck by a new thought. "When did that French nurse first come to Ribbelsdale's, anyway?"

"Two years ago. But you're barking up the wrong tree there. She came to me herself, as I've told you, and everything she said I've since verified. She's sort of my lay-brother."

"And it was you who just claimed we weren't dealing with a moron!" exclaimed the Inspector. "I'll be thinking I'm dealing with one if you pull any more such remarks. It may have been just luck that this French dame saw Miss Wilder—I mean Mrs. Armstrong—that night. It may be true that she was giving the baby a bottle, or it may be that she had other reasons for being awake. Maybe it was she whom Mrs. Armstrong 'felt' in the music room. We have only her word for the statement that she saw Mrs. Armstrong from the nursery window, remember."

"But I'm sure . . ."

"That's the fallacy in your fascinating method,

my lad," chided Flynn benignly. "You can't be sure of anything."

"Can't I?" Colt elevated his brows coolly. "We shall see."

"Yeah," agreed Flynn grimly, then added: "Let's bury the hatchet for to-day. I want to sum up the case and get to work on it again. You go to New Haven with Mrs. Ribbelsdale if you think anything can come of it. I'll look after this end. It looks like a wild goose chase, to me, but probably you have some deep-dyed plot worked out."

"You're more intelligent than I thought, Flynn," interrupted Colt blandly. "As a matter of fact, something did occur to me, and that was why I suggested the trip. You see if we go over the identical ground to-morrow she may consciously or unconsciously pull something which will give me the clue I lack. And there seems little else I can do for the present. Of course, if anything new comes up . . ."

"I'll let you know at once when I get hold of Cynthia's maid, or any other developments," offered Flynn magnanimously.

"You seem confident."

"I am."

"All I can say, old fellow, is that I hope she'll be alive when you find her. People with information to give us have a disconcerting way of be-

coming corpses. I believe Mrs. Ribbelsdale was put out of the way because she knew too much. Probably your maid has already been disposed of. I repeat we're dealing with a fiend incarnate," Colt's voice was grim. "She—or he—will stop at nothing . . . nothing, I say. I feel in my bones that we're not as near the solution of this business as we should be. We know a lot more than we did, but what good does it do us to know that in all probability one of four persons is guilty? And not even a certainty of that!"

"Oh, I'm doing a lot of investigating I haven't mentioned in detail," Flynn said soothingly. "Don't get discouraged. If it's one of those four we'll manage to pin it to the right one. If it isn't it may take longer, but with my boys all around that house no one will get in to do any further mischief."

"How in heaven's name do you expect to pin it to *one*? I can find motives for both Dorcas and Suzanne, and, given time, I probably could do as well by Peter and Mademoiselle Monot." Colt grinned ruefully.

"I'm not looking for motives. I'm after facts. That maid that went to Tiffany's, first. Then I'm checking up the whereabouts of every member of the household when those letters were posted in New York and when the mysterious Cynthia visited

Tiffany's. That's taking time because no one ever remembers accurately what their friends and relatives did a month ago, to say nothing of a year, and one coincidence won't do. We've got to match as many pieces as we can. Convictions are not any too easy to get, especially if it's a pretty woman. We've got to get all the dope we can before we pull an arrest."

"I agree with you there. I don't want Pulver laughing at me when he returns. But he'll laugh just as much if we don't make any arrest at all . . ." Colt frowned.

Flynn smiled a most friendly smile. "You're in a funk. It's natural when things go slow like they have to-day. When you've had more experience you won't even notice it."

The unconsciously patronizing tone of the Inspector at once restored Colt to normal.

"You mistake me entirely, my dear Flynn," he waved his hand airily, as he rose to go. "I *know* who did it, and it's because I'm beginning to penetrate the depths of deviltry that I'm afraid . . ."

"Good God, man, if you know who did it why didn't you say so?"

"Not yet! I've no proof that wouldn't be jeered out of court. And I'd not likely get any if we move prematurely. I believe our only hope is not to let the murderer know we know. Play their

own game, so to speak. And you're not the actor I want for such a part . . ."

"I say, are you kidding, or what's the big idea?" Flynn protested flabbergasted.

"Let's say I'm kidding!" Colt's manner at another time would have been unbearable, but the Inspector was too taken aback to even notice it. He simply sat and stared at the retreating back of the young Assistant District Attorney.

FRIDAY
OCTOBER TWENTY-SIXTH

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ON THE following morning, before Rodney Colt had finished his breakfast, his door bell was vigorously rung.

"See who it is, Sampson," he directed.

Almost instantly Sampson returned. His mouth was agape.

"It's the widder, Mr. Colt. Shall I let her in?"

"Why, Sampson, where are your manners? Do you ever leave ladies standing on the steps? I'm ashamed of you!" As he spoke, he rose from the table and turned toward the hall. "I'll meet her myself, and apologize for you."

He swung the door open with an expansive gesture.

"Fair lady, enter. To what do I owe this early visit?"

"I know I shouldn't have come here,"—Suzanne was distressed,—"but I've been awake all night and I couldn't stay in that house another minute!"

"Has anything happened?" Colt tried to veil the eagerness he felt.

"Yes . . . and no," Suzanne forced a smile.

"There've been no further murders, if that's what you mean. But I'm worried about both Dorcas and Peter. They keep their doors locked and act most mysteriously . . . and . . ." she hesitated. "And I don't quite trust Mademoiselle Monot, my nurse, you know."

"Come in, and tell me," Colt led the way toward his reception room, but Suzanne made no motion to follow.

"No . . . not *inside*." She smiled again, wanly. "I want to be out under the sky . . . It's silly of me, but I'm not myself lately. I brought my car so that we could start from here. I'll wait in it until you're ready."

She put her hand on the door knob as she spoke and opened it.

"Fresh air, blue sky, space, freedom!" she said softly.

Colt picked up his coat, hat and gloves from the hall seat.

"I can come at once," he spoke solicitously. "I don't believe you ought to go through the ordeal of a trip to New Haven. I have a better idea." He took her arm and led her to the waiting car. It was the bright green Isotta-Frascini limousine he had seen beside the yellow Rolls that first morning. It seemed a strange car for a girl to drive.

"Let me stop at my office to see if there is any-

thing imperative, then let's drive up to Norfolk or somewhere for lunch. That is, if you don't mind using your car. I haven't one," he smiled.

"I'd love that!" The life had come back into her voice and a delicate flush spread over her face. "To get clear away from it all for a few hours . . ." A shadow replaced the eager expectation of her glance. "But ought I to leave home?"

"Why not? You had intended to take me to New Haven. This will take scarcely longer, and you can pull yourself together. You'll need all your courage this next week."

"What do you mean?" Suzanne was so startled that she narrowly escaped a collision with a passing car.

"I'll tell you . . . when we've had our lunch."

And no further answer could Suzanne get to her questions before they arrived at the District Attorney's office.

"I won't be a minute," Colt called over his shoulder as he took the steps two at a time.

Suzanne would have been amazed if she could have followed the young Assistant District Attorney's movements from the time he entered his office.

He brushed by Apollo without a word and hurried into the private office closing the door. Then he turned to the telephone. He first had a hurried conversation with Flynn which left the Inspector

more bewildered and irate than he found him, which was saying a good deal. He next called Jimmy Armstrong and got that amiable friend into a furore at his seemingly inane commands and exhortations.

"My God, Rod," Jimmy had ejaculated. "You must be mad!"

"I'm not," was the grim retort. "It might be better, if I were. Remember, it was you who started the whole fracas. I was peacefully taking a shower when you broke in and dragged me into this. So long, old chap, and keep a weather eye peeled." He hung the receiver on its hook.

His eyes had a far-away look. He reached again for the telephone, then hesitated. He was never to forgive himself for the error in judgment that permitted him to leave his office without making that last call.

"You've been ages," Suzanne greeted his return to the car.

"I had to go through my mail."

"Was there . . . anything?" Her voice faltered.

"Nothing. That is nothing new about your trouble. Other affairs galore." He sank into the seat at her side and took out a cigar. "I've nothing to offer you but a cigar," he said ruefully, and her fleeting smile did not escape him.

They covered miles and miles of smooth macadam before they drew up in front of the Norfolk Inn. And as yet, Colt had learned nothing for which he had sacrificed his time. Except that Suzanne was as astute as she was beautiful, and that was no surprise.

Although she said she had left in great haste, there was nothing in her appearance to indicate it. Her black crêpe ensemble and soft felt hat from Reboux set off her fair pale face and blue eyes. There was something at once wilful and wistful about her which touched Colt's heart; sentiment was a thing he rarely allowed himself, and he knew it had no place in his business, but he had to admit to himself that the tragedies at the Ribelsdale home had aroused his sympathy.

He leaned back now and watched Suzanne across the table. A faint flush had remained in her cheeks and her full lips were less inclined to tremble. The fleckless white cloth with its basket of luscious fruits had almost a homelike look. Suzanne had eaten well of the lunch he had ordered, and she was now intent in peeling an orange in delicate lotus-shaped strips.

"Why won't you be open with me?" Colt broke the silence, suddenly, hoping to take her off her guard.

"I have told you that I'm at an impasse, even

as you," she smiled slowly. "I believe you suspect me, as much as anyone . . . now admit it!"

"Foolish child," softly,— "Why do you insist on maintaining a pose? Do you think you can conceal the truth forever?"

"Who knows?"

She lifted a slice of orange on her fork and raised it to her mouth.

"What makes Peter afraid?"

Suzanne raised astonished eyes.

"Haven't I told you often? There is something spooky about that house. He feels it too. He is even more sensitive than I am."

"The house! Bah! It's a woman who wears a four-and-a-half shoe—C width."

Her voice was steady when she replied.

"Then you . . . know . . ."

"I know that all three of you women, you, your sister, and Mademoiselle Monot wear between a three and a four-and-a-half."

"Then it must be one of us?" Her mouth twisted into a half smile.

"But the Inspector can tell from the prints we found that the shoe was slightly large for its wearer . . ."

"Did you bring me here to insult my sister or me?" Suzanne's eyes flashed angrily. "You know that applies to one of us!"

"Did you know that your sister was married to Jimmy Armstrong?"

Colt spoke softly, but Suzanne turned on him as if she had been stung.

"Why do you lie to me! Why!"

"It is the simple truth, my dear lady. They were married on the night your husband was murdered."

Colt watched her narrowly and saw the fear which spread over her face. She laughed wildly.

"If they had told me . . . if they had been honest with me . . . if . . ." She burst into violent weeping. "I must go home at once . . . at once . . . I must save . . ." she bit her lip in chagrin. "Oh, why did you bring me here? I thought you were kind . . ."

Colt smiled rather grimly.

"You helped me find those letters from Cynthia. Without those, we might not——"

He could see that Suzanne was thinking rapidly.

"Then you really are kind . . . You brought me away to-day to save me from the disgrace."

"I brought you here to tell you what I have told you, certainly. You are an intelligent young woman, Mrs. Ribbelsdale. What you do next is up to you."

Suzanne rose and bent across the table and said softly:

"I must see Jimmy Armstrong at once. Take me home."—The expression on Colt's face made her pause. "Or is it—too late?"

Colt did not answer, but instead left to pay his bill. When he returned, the car with Suzanne at the wheel was waiting.

"Does the Inspector know?" she asked him quietly, as he took the seat by her side.

"He does, and so does Jimmy Armstrong."

During the long return drive Colt scarcely spoke. He furtively watched Suzanne, and he could see that her mind was not on the driving. It was with a sigh of relief that he alighted at the Ribbelsdale house and saw the Inspector advance to greet him. It had been a hectic ride for them both.

Inspector Flynn's face was singularly grave.

"I am glad you have both come at last," he said. "Peter Wilder is dead."

Suzanne's hand fluttered to her breast. Her eyes were wide and frightened as they met the cold determined glance of Inspector Flynn.

But Colt was even more disturbed than Suzanne.

"My God!" he exclaimed in a voice of contrition, "I should have foreseen this!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE Assistant District Attorney followed the Inspector into the house and up the stairs to the room which until now had been firmly closed against all officers of the law. Neither spoke until they had passed the policeman at the entrance and shut themselves inside.

“When?” asked Colt.

“A maid called me about eleven. They are all as nervous as witches here. Young Wilder hadn’t put in an appearance, and finally the chauffeur broke in the door. And this is what they found,” he gestured toward the narrow bed with its prostrate immobile figure.

With quick steps Colt went to the bedside and looked down on Peter Wilder. The face was scarcely more drawn or colorless in death than it had been when Colt last saw the boy. His features looked singularly boyish; now that life no longer tormented the mind, a half smile was frozen on the white lips. He had died unsuspecting and—apparently—happy.

It puzzled Colt. He had never seen Peter Wilder

smile. There had always been pain in the eyes, an uneasy, thwarted expression about the whole countenance. But now, in death, it was as if the boy had found peace.

"What do you make of it, Flynn?"

The Inspector had stood silent, but he was bristling with excitement.

"He died just like the others . . . hyoscine in his drink . . . And there's no doubt this trip that the drink was prepared by Miss Wilder, that is, Mrs. Armstrong. I've got them both downstairs under observation. They couldn't have acted more guilty than they did, but I can't make out how much he's wise to."

"Jimmy? Not being altogether a fool, he's been tumbling gradually like the rest of us." Colt walked over to the window and looked out on the serene autumnal sunset.

"But there's no motive," Flynn's persistent voice broke in.

"She's mad . . ."

"What do you mean mad? Murdering for amusement? I never heard of such a thing!" Flynn's common sense refused to admit the fantastic.

"I think it started as a game, a game for jaded emotions, but I've begun to doubt if murder would have actually resulted without a stronger impetus.

Perhaps she thought that she was discovered . . .”

“Discovered? But if there had been no murder, what would there have been to discover?”

“Ah, thereby hangs a tale!” Colt tried to smile. “But I’ll never forgive myself for letting this happen to the boy. I thought with you all here he was safe . . .”

“It happened before you ever left Dartford, Colt. Wilder’s been dead since between three and five A.M. if we’re to believe the doctor.”

“Does Dorcas Armstrong admit it?”

“She admits that she gave him the drink. She couldn’t get around it. We found a swell thumb print on the glass!”

“Why haven’t you arrested her? Soft-hearted?”

Flynn grunted.

“I haven’t arrested her because one of the maids saw Mademoiselle Monot enter his room within ten minutes of the time Mrs. Armstrong left it.”

Colt whistled softly.

“And we found in the French dame’s room a pair of slippers with still a trace of mud. The pair which *exactly* fit the marks left by Cynthia.”

Colt shrugged.

“I presume they were hidden.”

“That’s the funny part of it! They were just under the edge of her bed.”

“And I gather she had the nerve to say that they

weren't hers, even that she'd never seen them."

"She certainly was very hoity-toity."

"Have you arrested her?"

"No, I've got her in another room under police surveillance."

"Good heavens, Flynn! You'll need the whole force if you start that way!"

"And if I need 'em, I'll have 'em," Flynn said doggedly. "I'm going to find the murderer . . ."

"But I phoned you this morning, don't you remember? And I told you who did it. Why don't you arrest her?"

"Yeh! And what's to prove you're right? A jury'd laugh us out of court."

"Well, of course I must admit, that juries aren't renowned for either intelligence or imagination, but still . . . It's all quite logical, I'll wager. It's just that we haven't found the magic key yet."

"We certainly *have not!*"

"I'd like to talk with Jimmy and his new wife," Colt said. "By the way, can I have the slippers you purloined from our enchanting Félicité?"

"They're across the hall. I've got a man over there."

"What, another!" Colt threw up his hands in mock amazement. The shock of Peter Wilder's death had left him momentarily numbed. But the brief talk with the Inspector had served to clarify

several things. And suddenly and for the first time he had a premonition that he was nearing the end.

He found Dorcas and Jimmy sitting with their chairs drawn close together and their hands clasped. Jimmy's full genial face was lined with tell-tale signs of worry, and Dorcas's lovely face was wan and pale with the strain of the past four days. It was as if she were immersed in a dream and Jimmy clasped numbed hands.

The Inspector, with professional lack of sensibility, had put them in David Ribbelsdale's study. For an instant Colt wondered whether it was actually grim intent which chose this small room for their temporary confinement.

"God, I'm glad you've come!" Jimmy greeted Colt. "That ass of an Inspector must actually think we did it."

"Well, he found this young lady's finger prints on the tumbler." Colt repressed a feeling of triumph, so shocked was he by the change sorrow had made in Dorcas Wilder. She was haggard and pale, and about the exquisite mouth were lines of pain.

"But our French female went in to see him afterwards," Jimmy asserted triumphantly.

"I'm sure she didn't kill Peter," Dorcas turned from Jimmy to Colt. Tears welled in her eyes.

"He killed himself," she said and broke into sobs.

Colt sat down on one of the stiff little chairs and moved it nearer the others. "What do you mean? That Peter committed suicide?"

Dorcas nodded and tried to control her tears.

"That might explain the smile . . ." Colt mused aloud. "He had found an escape . . . without telling . . ."

"Telling? What do you mean?" There was a shrill note in Dorcas's voice which Colt had not heard before.

Colt smiled reassuringly.

"Your brother *knew* . . . How much he knew I'm not positive, but certainly a great deal. And he refused to tell. He took his secret with him."

His effect on Dorcas was astounding. Her eyes blazed suddenly with indignation.

"How dare you? Peter wasn't a coward! That isn't why he killed himself. He did it to save us disgrace!"

"Disgrace?" It was Jimmy who spoke. "You don't mean that he did it!"

"Did it! Did it!" she was almost hysterical. "Did it! Did it! As if that was the only disgrace! Think of little David and Dolly! Will they ever out-live this?" She threw her arm out with a gesture that took in Colt and all the other representa-

tives of law and order. "Policemen in every room. Kept prisoners, yes," she retorted as Colt started to protest, "prisoners, in David's study. The very room he used to call his sanctum sanctorum! Why couldn't Mother Ribbelsdale have left it alone? David would have wanted her to. I know . . . I understood David better even than his mother did." Her voice held a curious pride.

"Why did you put your slippers under Mademoiselle Monot's bed?" Colt asked her gently.

"What do you mean!" she asked stupidly.

"Just what I say. They were found there."

"My slippers found under Mademoiselle's bed? I swear I know nothing about it."

"Did she have access to your room? Could she have borrowed them?"

"I don't lock my door, like the others, if that's what you mean. Whenever I leave the room anyone can go in. I have nothing to hide."

Rather gratuitous that last, Colt thought, as he paused before replying.

"If no one had anything to hide, we could make an arrest at once," he said.

"You phoned me . . ." Jimmy stopped.

"Have you told anyone?"

"Don't you know me better than that? I gave my word."

"This thing's harder on you than anyone else, old man," Colt said, sympathetically, gripping Jimmy's hand and wringing it.

Then he turned on his heel and abruptly left the room. He searched out the Inspector.

"The slippers you found in Mademoiselle Monot's room belong to Mrs. Armstrong," he greeted Flynn.

"How do you know?"

"She just told me," Colt smiled airily.

"But . . . I can't understand . . . why did she put them there?"

"She didn't."

"Perhaps you know who did," the Inspector retorted with disgust.

"I do," was the unperturbed reply.

"Perhaps if you'd tell what you know we'd be a damn sight better off." The Inspector was losing his temper.

"If I thought so, I'd tell you at once, Inspector," chaffed Colt.

"Well, what the hell do I do with French dame?"

"I shouldn't let her go," Colt grinned. "Instead, I'd make more arrests. Don't glare so at me! If you don't want my advice, Flynn, you shouldn't ask for it."

A slight noise startled both men. Colt turned to find Dr. Scofield behind them.

"I didn't expect to find you here," Colt greeted him.

"Dr. Dayton asked me to come along. And I hunted you two out to ask if I could say hello to the young Armstrongs on my way out."

Inspector Flynn was about to give his consent when a gesture of warning from Colt stayed him. The gesture had not been missed by the doctor, who flushed slightly but gave no other sign of his discomfiture.

"I'll just come along with you, if you don't mind," Colt said pleasantly. "You see we have our own reasons for keeping those two where they are."

"I see," Doctor Scofield replied gravely, as he followed Colt to the door of David Ribbelsdale's study. Both men were thinking of the last time they had been together in that little room. That was the beginning of their mutual distrust.

As they entered Dorcas jumped to her feet with a cry, and now stood hesitatingly looking from the doctor to Colt. The latter had no difficulty in realizing that she would have thrown herself into the doctor's arms had he not followed.

He saw Doctor Scofield signal a warning to Dorcas, but he gave no indication that he had noticed it. He stood quietly and waited while formal words of sympathy were exchanged. Then,

without a word, he turned and left with the doctor.

The elder man paused just outside the door. He frowned and brushed back his iron gray hair with a gesture of despair. Then he turned to Colt suddenly.

"You're a silly young fool, Colt!" he clipped his words angrily. "If you'd kept your nose out of this affair, we might have been spared the death of two dearly loved people. Keep at your criminal bungling, and we'll have a third to mourn before long."

Before the astonished Colt could prevent him, the doctor had marched through the dining room and reached the door. By the time Colt got there, the doctor's car had turned the corner into Ellsworth Boulevard.

"Bird flown?" The Inspector asked, standing behind him.

SATURDAY
OCTOBER TWENTY-SEVENTH

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE feeling of futility which pursued Colt through the remainder of the hectic night had not diminished when he entered his office on the following morning. The usual pile of mail was on his desk. He picked up one letter after another and threw them down again without opening them. At last one made him hesitate. It was addressed in an unfamiliar hand and was stamped with an incorrect delivery from the previous afternoon.

"Someone who didn't know my address too well," Colt mused, as he slit the envelope.

The letter read:

"DEAR MR. COLT:

I have been too proud. When one is disgraced one should be humble. But to be humble is not easy. And I am not used to it. My mother was a proud woman.

But I dare no longer keep back the secret. I know who the murderer is. I knew before Mrs. Ribbelsdale died. I might have saved her. I have been tormented by that thought day and night.

May God forgive me for the betrayal.
I do it only to save others, not myself.
The guilty person is my sister. I over-
heard the conversation in which she be-
trayed herself to Mrs. Ribbelsdale. I
can prove it, if you will come to me.
I will answer all your questions.

PETER WILDER."

As Colt was reading the last lines, Inspector Flynn entered the office. Without a word, Colt handed the letter to him.

"I thought so," the Inspector commented. "But I don't understand why you didn't receive this before. The boy certainly died in his sleep night before last. We should have had this yesterday."

"The envelope explains. It went to a wrong address. But it would already have been too late to save him."

"Do you think *she* knew he wrote you?"

"Most certainly not!" Colt smiled knowingly.

"Why did you tell me to let them go? God knows where they have flown!" Flynn glared.

"They?" Colt raised his eye-brows.

"Of course your precious friend, Armstrong, has gone with her."

"Well," Colt grinned. "Why don't you hot-foot it after them? Not stand here abusing me . . ."

"Damn your impudence, I will!" The Inspector's voice was no friendlier than his choice of words.

Colt held out his hand, while a smile hovered around the corners of his mouth.

"Shake," he said laconically.

The Inspector clasped his hand vigorously.

"You can spare time for a drink. I've just what you like in my cupboard here." Colt stepped to a closed closet built into the wall, and took out a bottle marked "Bay-Rum."

"Johnny Walker . . . and still going strong," he commented with a grin, as he drew out a soda siphon and two glasses. "Pre-war, and safe. I stand for State Rights," he added mockingly.

"I'm ashamed of you," Inspector Flynn spoke sternly, as he raised his glass and took a sip. "Down the hatch," he added, and sat down opposite his host.

"Now tell me," Colt asked. "When did you first suspect Dorcas Armstrong?"

"First," the Inspector paused reflectively. "When I heard that trumped-up story about their marriage."

"Trumped-up?" This time it was Colt who betrayed astonishment.

"Sure . . . Knew you wouldn't take the trouble to verify it. But I'm an old hand at that kind

o' thing. And I've been repaid plenty." Here he stopped to grin at Colt. "There's no record at City Hall of any marriage between your friend and any female. You can bet your bottom dollar on that!"

"You know, I believe you're right there," assented Colt.

"Right, hell! Sure I'm right!" The Inspector emptied his glass.

"Have some more?" offered Colt, but Flynn covered the glass with his hand.

"Moderation is my motto. Thoroughness and moderation."

They were standing thus when a knock made them both turn.

"Lady to see you, sir," Apollo touched his nose, as a signal. "Shall I show her in?"

"By all means," assented Colt, heartily. He turned hurriedly to the Inspector. "Stay. I beg of you. It's Mrs. Ribbelsdale." With a quick movement Colt hid bottle and glasses in a handy drawer.

The door was opened again: "Mrs. Ribbelsdale," announced Apollo, with a manner copied after stage butlers.

The Inspector had been standing first on one foot, then on the other from the moment the visitor had been announced. He felt no embarrassment

about murderers, or murderesses either. But how to conduct himself with the sister of the criminal when the sister didn't know that her sister was a criminal, was a facer. In order not to betray his embarrassment he went to the other extreme, and extended his hand over-cordially to Suzanne as she entered the room.

Colt and Suzanne had not met since they were greeted on their return from Norfolk by the Inspector with the news of Peter's death. Her face seemed paler and more tired, yet her eyes met his as bravely as ever. Contrasted with the black of her clothes her fair hair and blue eyes looked lovelier than ever. She concealed her surprise at the Inspector's greeting, and bowed to Colt. Her manner was more constrained than before and she appeared to be laboring under a recent shock.

"May I sit down?" she looked from one to the other of the men, and Colt hastened to draw up a chair. "I'm upset and hurt, as you'll understand, when I tell you. . . ." She threw out her hands in an appealing gesture of helplessness, which went straight to the Inspector's heart.

"News?" questioned Colt gravely.

Suzanne nodded. It was as if her feelings were so overcharged as to render words difficult. She pressed her lips tight to steady them. Then she leaned a trifle toward the waiting men, and said:

"Last night . . . I made a horrible discovery . . . all night I have wrestled with myself . . . to tell or not . . ." She paused, and lowered her eyes, but it was too late to conceal the tears.

"Yes . . . ?" Colt urged. He did not take his eyes from Suzanne's lovely and expressive face.

"My sister . . ." she hesitated; then went on with determination. "My sister, Dorcas, went out after you all left . . . Jimmy took her for a ride . . . I had been troubled by a story, which Mademoiselle herself had told me of finding Dorcas's slippers in her room. Together my nurse and I went into my sister's room. I can't tell you why . . . I felt that I had to . . ." she shivered. "I've caught the general fear which pervades my home. I can't bear to leave my babies in it. I have them waiting in the car outside now, with Mademoiselle."

"You found something of interest in your sister's room?" This time it was the Inspector who prompted her.

"This," replied Suzanne simply, and held out to them a small package carefully wrapped in tissue paper.

From the instant Colt spied the package in Suzanne's lap, he had suspected its contents and he was not surprised when the Inspector opened the

cover and revealed several sheets of paper and envelopes identical to those used by "Cynthia."

"The same paper," gasped Flynn. "That's the final link! The murderess is Cynthia." He turned sympathetically. "I am sorry, Mrs. Ribbelsdale, that we can no longer spare you the truth," he said.

Suzanne smiled gallantly, but her pale face belied the smile.

"I knew . . . when we found this."

"Was it hidden?" Colt asked curiously.

Suzanne nodded assent.

"It was the merest chance we found it. It was in a hat box, under several old hats which she no longer wears. I don't know why I looked there. . . ."

"Were you looking for this?" Colt indicated the letter paper.

Suzanne smiled ruefully.

"I don't really know *what* we were looking for. We just felt we must search. It sounds as if I were a coward. But after those slippers were found in Mademoiselle's room . . . and we heard they fitted those footprints below the window . . ."

Inspector Flynn expressed complete understanding.

Suddenly Suzanne burst into violent weeping.

"Oh, I wish I hadn't come . . . I hate myself!" she cried. "I've been like a mother and sister to Dorcas, and now she's betrayed me . . ."

"Try to control yourself, Mrs. Ribbelsdale." Colt put his hand gently but firmly on her shaking shoulder. "You are quite safe. You must remain here until the Inspector has made his arrest. We will spare you what we can."

Suzanne winced at the word arrest, but gradually the violence of her sorrow subsided, leaving her eyes misty and appealing.

"If you will just step out with my Greek god, he'll look after you while the Inspector and I have a five minutes' chat. Then you can bring your babies and nurse all in here, or I'll go with you to some hotel. It won't be long." Colt stepped to the door. "Apollo!" he called. "Make Mrs. Ribbelsdale comfortable out there. She is going to wait for me."

Suzanne rose unsteadily to her feet, and a fleeting smile repaid Flynn for his immediate assistance. When they were again alone, the Inspector turned to Colt.

"Well? All set, aren't we?"

"Certainly finding this writing paper is pretty strong evidence."

"I'm darn sorry for the sister."

Such sentiments were new to the Inspector.

"I'm always sorry for a murderess's relatives," said Colt, rather sententiously. "But tell me the full steps in your case against Dorcas Wilder. How long have you known that the marriage, hers and Jimmy's, was false?"

"Since an hour after you told me." He grinned appreciatively at Colt's impassive face. "Then, she acted queer from the first. Didn't you notice it?"

"I did. And I also observed her photograph on David Ribbelsdale's desk when I first went into his study."

"You didn't tell me that. . . ."

"No At the time I didn't appreciate it. I only knew that jealousy and possible enmity existed between Mrs. Ribbelsdale and her younger sister. I didn't fully understand it then."

"I'm expecting to find some irregularities in the accounts of Ribbelsdale and Armstrong, too," continued Flynn. "They're being examined this morning. I waited to get the man I wanted to do it. I don't expect the trouble to show on the surface."

"You think then that Jimmy had a hand in all this?"

"What else can a man think? Wasn't it he you left to watch old Mrs. Ribbelsdale the morning she

died? Wasn't it he who held young Mrs. Ribbelsdale in conversation while her sister went about her horrible business?"

Colt nodded. Flynn went on:

"That trumped-up story of their marriage is what first put me wise to them, I admit. And when I was called because of young Peter's death I felt certain of my man . . . and woman."

"You've never connected Doctor Scofield with it?"

"Connected him? What do you mean?"

"The poison used . . . the hysocine was almost certainly obtained from him. Don't you think that perhaps he, and not Jimmy, was . . . ?"

"I do not!" Flynn interrupted emphatically. "There is no possible motive in his case, and nothing to connect him with those two."

"He was darn anxious to speak to them alone yesterday."

"Yes," Flynn frowned. "That was queer."

"I wouldn't say 'queer,'" Colt smiled. "On the contrary I think it was quite natural . . . in the circumstances . . ."

"He who laughs last, laughs best," retorted the Inspector irrelevantly.

"Quite. . . . Have you heard yet from Cynthia's maid?" Colt questioned with equal irrelevance.

"Not up to this morning. But I expect to any minute. However, we won't need that so badly now we've found this writing paper. It all hangs together, you know." Flynn rose as he spoke. "I'd better get a warrant in order, and be about it. I admit, I always hate to make arrests even when the woman's a fiend like this one."

"I can't agree with you there. It would give me the most exquisite pleasure in the world to bring the murderer of old Mrs. Ribbelsdale and young Peter Wilder to justice. Age and youth appeal to my protective instincts." Colt grinned.

"Well . . . so long!" Flynn turned reluctantly toward the door. "Keep Mrs. Ribbelsdale another fifteen minutes, then bring her along. It'll be better if she's home after the arrest is made. She'll be more secluded from reporters and all the publicity pests."

"I'll tell her of your thoughtfulness. I'm sure she will appreciate it."

Colt held the door while the Inspector passed outside, then he beckoned to Suzanne who had arisen.

"You would be more comfortable in here, I think," Colt said. "Unless you'd prefer to drive around for a quarter of an hour."

"It doesn't matter much where one is, does it?" Suzanne raised a sad face to his. "When one has

been through so much, one's senses are numbed."

"That's God's kindness to suffering humanity," said Colt. "We couldn't live otherwise. Dorcas was very close to you, wasn't she? Dorcas and Peter, both?"

"They were only my half-brother and sister," Suzanne explained, dropping into a chair, "but if I felt a difference I never let them see it. Peter especially I mothered and sistered both. He never felt any difference between me and Dorcas, unless he felt I was the more truly his sister. We were very close until this. . . ." Tears filled her eyes.

"Dorcas caused some estrangement?"

"I tried not to see it, but I knew that David was becoming fond of her. Then she turned Peter against me . . . and even Jimmy . . ."

"I almost forgot to tell you. The Inspector has discovered that she and Jimmy aren't married after all."

"Aren't married?" Suzanne's eyes were wide and unbelieving. "Then that was all a lie! But why? Why?" Suzanne's ungloved hand fluttered to the fur at her throat. She couldn't conceal how the revelation had affected her.

"You care for Jimmy too, don't you?" Colt asked gently.

"Oh, how can you say such a thing? If I did, I'd never let anyone know it. I'd die with it

locked in my heart!" she burst out passionately. "I would be loyal to David's memory, as I was loyal to him in life!"

"I'm sorry I said that. I had no right to," Colt apologized contritely. "I think if we start along now it will be about the right time," he added looking at the watch on his wrist. "We want to arrive before the news of the arrest reaches the reporters. We can at least save you that ordeal if we get you home and you keep to your room."

"You are very thoughtful," said Suzanne gratefully, as she pulled on her black gloves. Her old haughty manner had quite returned, Colt felt. Her head was higher than it had been for days. It was evident that to have the hectic search terminate, even in so sad a manner was better than the continuance of uncertainty.

Colt helped her into the driving seat, just as he had done on the previous day. Only this time the governess was seated in back with the two beautiful Ribbelsdale children. It was a silent ride through the crowded streets of Dartford to the house in the suburbs which David Ribbelsdale had built for his wife. And many curious eyes followed the process of the car. For days the Ribbelsdale case had filled the front pages of the newspapers and the young society matron was known at least by sight to thousands.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A STRANGE brooding quiet lay over the house, when Suzanne halted her car at the back entrance. There was no sound; no sight of human habitation.

Mademoiselle Monot's voice was tremulous as she turned to Suzanne to ask:

"Shall I keep the children outdoors?"

For an instant Suzanne hesitated. "No, I think it best to take them to the nursery and keep them there." She lifted her small daughter in her arms, as she spoke, and turned to Colt, who had alighted from the car and was standing at her side.

"Do you think . . ." she moistened her dry lips, "do you think they have taken her away?" she asked.

Colt shook his head. He was as puzzled as she by the deserted air of the place. He held the door open while she and Félicité, leading little David by the hand, passed within.

The same hushed stillness reigned indoors. The rooms were all spread out in full view, empty. Above it was the same: the bedroom doors all stood open; the rooms were all empty.

An expression of fear came over Suzanne Ribbelsdale's face as she turned from the day-nursery, where she had left the governess and children, to Colt who was waiting in the passageway.

"What does it mean? Have they taken her away?" She frowned. "Would they take the servants, too?"

"I'm as surprised as you, Mrs. Ribbelsdale." The sound of an automobile in the driveway, made Colt pause. He passed through one of the bedrooms and looked out. "It's the Inspector," he called over his shoulder to Suzanne. "He has Jimmy with him."

"Jimmy?" Horror and unbelief mingled in Suzanne's voice.

Colt had regained her side, and took her arm in his. "Let's go down," he said.

Inspector Flynn was the first to speak when met in the hall.

"She's given us the slip," he announced sternly. "But there's no chance of her making a get-away. I've put my best men on the job. Every road and train will be watched, while we make a thorough search of the neighborhood." He turned to Suzanne, and asked more gently: "You haven't any idea where your sister is, have you? It is your duty to tell, if you have."

"Why, no." Suzanne was white. "Doesn't

Jimmy know?" She raised her eyes and met those of Jimmy Armstrong squarely.

"I'm as worried as the rest of you. I supposed she was here until the Inspector came for me. I can't understand it." His voice trembled.

"That's all right." Flynn spoke sharply. "You'll have a chance to think it over alone. Maybe you'll remember then." He turned to Colt. "This friend of yours," he said sarcastically, "was about to beat it. He was all packed, when I caught him."

"That's nonsense!" Jimmy denied sharply. "I was packing, yes. I'd intended to go to . . ." He stopped suddenly.

"Come on, Armstrong. Out with it! It'll only go against you later. All this pretense don't go down with us fellows. You know where Dorcas Wilder is! Come, out with it!"

"I don't know . . . and if I did, I'd never tell!" He turned beseechingly to Colt. "Can't you stop this silly nonsense? I'm genuinely worried. I was to meet Dorcas here at ten. Here. And that's the truth."

"You were a bit late, son," retorted the Inspector. "It was ten-after-ten when I found you."

"Oh, what does it matter if I was late? Something has happened to Dorcas in the meantime . . ."

"Your lady wasn't here at ten o'clock, savvy? We know you're lying. I was clean through this place at nine-forty and it was as empty and quiet as a grave . . ."

"Don't . . ." protested Suzanne, nervously.

"Where are the servants?" Jimmy asked.

"Gone, too . . . Perhaps she took 'em with her . . ." Flynn grinned.

"Gone! But isn't that strange?" Jimmy asked. He was looking more and more scared.

"Yes, it is strange, Jimmy . . ." Colt spoke quietly. "Now listen to me. You can trust me, you know. You do know it, don't you, Jimmy?" His friend nodded. "Do exactly as the Inspector tells you!"

Flynn grinned, and Jimmy smiled ruefully. "Guess he'll have to!" interpolated the officer.

"That's all right. . . ." Colt's voice was steady and persistent. "I want you all to listen to me. Flynn will leave four policemen around this place. Mademoiselle and you, Mrs. Ribbelsdale, will take the children into the open and stay *together*, and with them. You will be safe, I promise you. You can take Jimmy to the lock-up, or do as you please with him, Flynn. I'm going to find Dorcas Wilder . . ."

"You don't know where she is?" Suzanne asked tremulously.

"No . . ." Colt spoke thoughtfully. "But I've a pretty good idea who does."

With that, he turned from the others. "Don't leave, Flynn, until those four men of yours are set. And get the children and their governess outside as soon as you can," he added to Suzanne.

When he reached the door, Colt was confronted by a car occupied by three plain-clothes men. "The Inspector in there?" one of them asked.

"Splendid!" Colt murmured under his breath. "Ho, Flynn!" he called loudly. "Here are three of the four, I wanted. Now you can give me a lift."

Suzanne came to the door. "These men will look after you and the children. Only keep away from the woods," he cautioned.

She nodded, and tried to smile her appreciation.

"Come along, Jimmy!" Colt spoke roughly. "You drive, Inspector." With a sympathetic salute, Flynn took his leave of Suzanne. He paused to give the men brief orders, then took the wheel. Jimmy rode between the Inspector and the Assistant District Attorney. He was too abashed by the turn of events to feel more than weakly indignant. And, moreover, he was worried far more than he cared to show at the disappearance of Dorcas Wilder. Whatever the Inspector imagined, Jimmy

knew no more than the others where or why she had gone.

"I'd like to stop at Dr. Scofield's," Colt was saying. "I think he knows . . . and it's time he tells . . ."

As the car slowed to a stop before the doctor's office, Colt jumped to the sidewalk. "Wait here. He may not be in."

Rodney Colt's guess was correct. The doctor had started on his calls twenty minutes earlier.

"Is it urgent?" the nurse had asked. "I can locate him in half an hour. He always leaves a list of his calls with me in case of emergency."

"It is very urgent," said Colt gravely. "I am from the District Attorney's office. When you have located him, ask him to wait where he is for us, and phone my office."

"I don't think he's flown, if I'm any judge of character," Colt said as he seated himself again in the car. "But it may be half an hour before we get hold of him. Come on down to my office, and wait."

"O.K.!" agreed the Inspector. "There's nothing I can do at present. But I'll stop and see if there's any mail or news come in at my place. Guess I can trust you with this young man, while I go in."

None of them spoke again until the Inspector

disappeared into his office; then Jimmy turned to Colt and said in a husky guarded voice.

"What do you make of it? Is Dorcas safe, do you think?"

"I'm puzzled, but I'm certain Suzanne was as amazed as any of us."

"Thank God!" Jimmy's frivolous manner had been replaced in these last days by one of serious responsibility.

"Flynn tells me you and Dorcas aren't married . . ."

"The devil he does!" Something like Jimmy's old time smile appeared about his tired eyes. "We were married just as I told you that night."

"But you can't have been, Jimmy. There'd have been a record."

"There is— In Nyack, New York. I went there and established a residence. We didn't want Suzanne to guess, you see . . . And so our ruse took in old Flynn, too. That's a funny one . . ."

At this juncture the Inspector came running from his office. He was waving what appeared to be a letter.

"You seem excited," Colt greeted him with amusement.

"What do you suppose?"

"That you have an answer from Cynthia's maid who called at Tiffany's . . ." said Colt, calmly.

Jimmy became alert. Then suddenly anxious.

"I'll let you see it, Colt, soon as we park at your joint." With exasperating calm Inspector Flynn put the note in his inner pocket and proceeded to start his car.

Neither Colt nor Jimmy deigned to ask further questions.

It seemed more like an hour than six minutes to the District Attorney's office.

"Want my friend, Jimmy?" Colt asked as they alighted.

The Inspector's eyes narrowed. Then he nodded abruptly. "Better take him into this. We may need his help."

"Help?" Jimmy smiled whimsically. "I thought you were out to hang me for murder."

"Sh!" Colt interrupted with mock caution. "Don't aggravate my colleague."

Flynn grinned good-naturedly. He held out his hand to Colt who grasped it warmly.

"You win," the Inspector said.

Then they went together into Rodney Colt's private office.

As soon as the door was closed, the Inspector handed over the letter to Colt.

"May I?" Jimmy asked nervously, as he essayed to read over the shoulder of his friend.

Jimmy's face was a study as he read:

"Police Inspector Flynn,

"Dartford, Conn.

"Dear Sir:

"I am a trained nurse by profession. You will find my name in the register in the state of California. I happened to be visiting my sister in Dartford when Mrs. David Ribbelsdale's child was born. My sister is a nurse in your community. She, my sister, was on a contagious case at the time the baby came. I took her place and proving satisfactory I was retained. It was I who went to Tiffany's and called for the things. I also mailed a letter addressed to Mr. David Ribbelsdale at the same time. Both the letter for Tiffany's and for which I got the package and the other letter for her husband were given me by Mrs. David Ribbelsdale herself. I hope this information will clear up matters. I only just heard via my sister, by telegram, that you were searching for me. You see she thought it might be me but didn't want to speak of it until sure.

"Yours truly,

"MATILDA BROWN, R. N."

"I thought so," Jimmy sank weakly to the nearest chair. "That's what you meant then, when you telephoned yesterday morning." He turned toward his friend.

"Yes," said Colt quietly.

"I was a fool not to understand before!" Jimmy's face became like chalk. "Dorcas . . . where is she?"

"I don't know, but I believe Dr. Scofield does. And I believe she is safe, Jimmy."

"Then you think the doctor suspected Suzanne?"

"From the first."

"And you?"

"I had no proof of her guilt until this letter came." Colt spoke very gently. He felt suddenly let down.

"Yeah, this'll hang her O.K.," said the Inspector with obvious satisfaction.

Colt smiled. "Not long since you were petting her yourself, Flynn," he reminded him.

Flynn shrugged. "Touch and go, it was . . ."

"Just so. And this time take my advice and grab the lady. She's the neatest little scoundrel you'll meet this side of Hell." Colt spoke with feeling.

"Want to come along?" the Inspector paused with his hand on the door knob.

"That's your job," Colt spoke with unconcealed satisfaction. "Jimmy and I'll just wait to see the doctor. You secure Suzanne and we'll do the same for her sister."

The Inspector gone, Jimmy grabbed Colt's arm.

"You don't think Suzanne has . . . ?" he could get no further.

"No, Jimmy. What Suzanne meant to do was to hang her little sister in her place."

"My God!"

"And if it hadn't been for your impetuosity she might have succeeded. In the ordinary course of events, she might. She overstepped herself when she guided me to that secret drawer with those faked 'Cynthia' letters. From that instant I could never quite get her out of my mind. And you see, Jimmy, I'd never have been there if you hadn't dragged me away from a perfectly good bath to come along with you. If the doctor had found those letters he'd have let it go at that."

"Suzanne didn't mean at first to let anyone suffer?"

"Not until she heard you and her sister were married. That sealed Dorcas's doom for her. And when to-day she heard that you weren't she was not a little nonplused," Colt smiled at the memory.

"You knew then? That's why you wanted the police there?"

"Exactly. When you're dealing with a woman like that you never know what deviltry she has up her sleeve. A murder more or less matters little or nothing to her."

Jimmy shuddered. "I'm terribly worried about

Dorcas. I can't help it. This waiting is unbearable." He wiped the perspiration from his head.

A knock followed by Apollo's perfect profile made them both jump.

"A nurse telephoned to say Dr. Scofield will see you at his office now, if you come straight along. He's busy and can't wait."

Jimmy hugged the astonished clerk.

"He won't have to wait!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DOCTOR SCOFIELD greeted them gravely.

"Dorcas, is she safe?" Jimmy had asked breathlessly. And the doctor had nodded his assent without speaking.

"You know where she is?" Jimmy eagerly had continued. "You are sure she is safe?"

"Sure."

The three men sat down in Dr. Scofield's consulting room.

"What was your idea in hiding Mrs. Armstrong, Doctor?" asked Colt.

"Because I was scared to death. But come, you are here to find out what I know. I will tell you everything, of course—including where Mrs. Armstrong is hidden." His quiet voice soothed Jimmy's agitation. Colt waited attentively.

"I don't need to say much about my life-long affection for Mr. Ribbelsdale's mother, but I must touch on it," Dr. Scofield began. His fine face showed his pain, though he kept his voice quiet and steady. "You see it was for her that I kept my early suspicions to myself. I thought David's

murder was done for a definite motive. I still believe that it was." He paused.

"You mean . . . ?" Colt inclined his head toward Jimmy, and the doctor nodded.

"Yes," he continued. "I think Suzanne Ribbelsdale tired of her husband almost at once. David was a proud chap, difficult to know, but when one did get to know him, he was—well, delightful." The doctor's voice trembled ever so slightly.

"It must have been nearly two years ago that David first came to me as his physician. And it was six months or more before I could believe what all my investigations pointed to: that he was taking at irregular intervals considerable quantities of arsenic. Now, arsenic in small amounts is a medicine. Some patients can stand very little, others show no reaction to much larger quantities. As it happened, David could stand relatively large quantities with only minor discomfort. But after a time, I think that both David and his mother became suspicious. He put the idea out of his head at once, but his mother was always a peculiarly sensitive soul, and no sensitive person could have lived in the atmosphere of that household and not sense something wrong. Two months ago she came to me. Even then she didn't say anything directly."

The doctor paused reflectively, and the pain in his eyes deepened.

"She told me," he went on, "of a case she had read of in France where a woman who was satiated with all the pleasures of life, had commenced slowly to poison her husband for the sole reason that the sensation was new. I don't know whether her story was true, or whether she used her own imagination in an allegory. Certainly I understood. And from that night on, David Ribbelsdale was in my confidence, and I in his. I still can't understand how she succeeded in poisoning him . . . unless he let her, in sheer desperation."

"But I don't understand, doctor," Jimmy said. "What sense was there in killing David, if she was torturing him for amusement?"

Dr. Scofield turned from one to the other of his auditors.

"You both look at this moment as horrified as I felt when I learned the truth," he observed sympathetically. "The cruelty of which humanity is capable is appalling. Yet the death of David Ribbelsdale came to me with as much of a shock as to any of you. And the manner of it more. He most certainly did not die of arsenic poisoning. In fact, for two months we had concluded that she had tired of her amusement, for we had observed no further symptoms. Then when David did die,

and so suddenly, it came to me that I had lost a tube of hyoscine tablets at the time of Suzanne's last confinement. Even then I didn't connect them with Suzanne. The tablets look like morphia and I imagined that some drug addict had taken them from my case when it was left in my car. I generally report such a loss to the police, but at the time my hyoscine disappeared I didn't notice that they had gone immediately, or that is, I was not certain just when they did. I knew a small dose would be harmless and would act so strangely as to arouse suspicion in a drug user, and I counted on any addict throwing them away."

"She got her knowledge partly from that book on *Twilight Sleep*," Colt interrupted.

"But I can't yet understand how David gave her the chance."

"When a woman like Suzanne sets her mind on doing away with her husband, the only way to stop her is to kill her first."

"But why should she want to rid herself of poor David?" Jimmy turned a puzzled look on Colt, and then slowly became blazing red with confusion. "You don't think . . . that she wanted to *marry* me!"

"But what I can't understand, doctor," Colt was saying gravely, "is how you dared hold out on us."

"Don't you see, my dear boy, I had no certain

knowledge. In a legal sense I haven't now. And if I had been wrong, if the poisoner had not been Suzanne but her sister, I might have done irretrievable harm. There was always that possibility. Or it might have been the French governess, or one of the servants, or his own mother. We only suspected Suzanne, remember."

"What did you make of those 'Cynthia' letters?"

"That is to me a very strange thing, Colt," the doctor replied. "He never mentioned them to me. I have puzzled a good deal over that. I should have said that I had David's complete confidence."

"And I believe you did. I don't think David Ribbelsdale ever saw those letters."

"What!" Jimmy stared at Colt in amazement.

"You know," Colt went on, "I have given a good deal of attention to those letters. And my conclusion is that Suzanne conceived the idea of writing them at the same time she started the arsenic poisoning . . . with the idea of an alibi of sorts in case she misjudged her doses and killed her husband too quickly. It's puzzled me until now why those letters began so long before the murder, but they coincide with the arsenic symptoms you have mentioned, Doctor, and I now believe that's the explanation."

"Good God!" gasped Jimmy. "What a cold-

blooded devil! I never would have believed it. Why, I've always liked Suzanne . . ."

"Do you think old Mrs. Ribbelsdale had anything more than her suspicions to go on when she suspected Suzanne?" Colt asked.

"Mrs. Ribbelsdale was a very acute woman. She immediately felt that there was something odd about those Cynthia letters, but I doubt if she actually thought they had been written by Suzanne. It would have seemed so impossible. It did to me."

"I think Dorcas suspected her from the first," offered Jimmy.

"She did," assented the doctor. "But she never admitted it to me until this morning. I sent for her as soon as I saw Suzanne leave the house. Then I went and collected the servants so as to be sure that none of them would give my plan away to Suzanne when she got back. Dorcas and the others are all on the Montreal Special. I have a summer home near the Canadian border, and unless Suzanne is a witch as well as a devil she will never suspect where they are."

"I believe she is more witch than devil . . . actually," Colt observed. "Does she know of your summer place?"

"She and David have visited me there."

"Then we can all thank God that the Inspector already has Suzanne under arrest," said Colt grimly. "She's never been quite certain about you, Dr. Scofield, and I give her credit for the cleverness to imagine what has happened when she finds that Dorcas is not the one who is suspected."

"Yes," agreed the doctor thoughtfully. "I believe you're right. She didn't quite trust me, I mean. She must instinctively have known that the murder of her mother-in-law would alienate my loyalty. Yesterday, when you, Mr. Colt, kept me from warning Dorcas, Suzanne had stopped me in the upper hall and said: 'How terrible that this should happen to dear Peter! How terrible! Poor Dad, I'm thankful he died before this blight fell on us. My own sister . . . oh, I shouldn't say it, even to you . . . but Dad always loved Peter and Dorcas best . . . It would have killed him . . .'

"I knew she was a hypocrite and probably a murderess, but I believe I played my part of the sympathetic friend well. She smiled after I had quieted her, and went on about how she still remembered what a little outcast she felt when her father remarried and she gradually came to know that his love which had been all hers from the time her mother died, had turned to his new wife and her babies. . . . And that until she met David she never again knew the sweetness she had

lost . . . She was the picture of pathos. She's a consummate actress!"

"Most successful murderesses are!" Colt remarked.

"Well, she's come to the end of her string," Jimmy said, with determination. "If the law doesn't attend to her, by God, I will!"

Colt smiled reflectively; for the first time in several days he was able to take a detached view of the whole thing. It was a great relief to him to know that Dorcas Armstrong was safe. He was fond of Jimmy and he had an idea he was going to be a friend of his wife.

"I think we ought to go up and join Dorcas," Jimmy was saying.

"I think *you* ought to," Colt agreed. "Just where is the place, doctor?"

"I'll give you full directions. You might as well go in your car." The doctor looked at his watch. "The last train until Monday left about fifteen minutes ago."

"Too bad. It'll take much longer by car, won't it?"

"Unless you drive all night. I should have been more thoughtful. But we didn't dare let you in on our scheme for fear of making Suzanne more suspicious. I nearly lost a case to-day over this thing," the doctor's voice was tired. "And I've

a lot of very sick people in my care, or I'd have gone along. But you can depend on my man, Martin. He, of course, knows nothing about the details, but he knows some danger hangs over Dorcas and he'll guard her with his life . . . but pshaw!—there'll be no need of that, with Suzanne arrested. I keep forgetting that she's already in the Inspector's hands."

There was a knock on the door. "Come in!" the doctor called.

"There's a man on the telephone, doctor, who won't be put off, or I wouldn't have disturbed you," the nurse apologized. "He insists on speaking with the District Attorney at once. Is he here?"

"Yes," replied Colt. "But who would know I am here?"

"He says his name is Flynn and you'll know," she said.

"Where is the phone?" A note of concern crept into Colt's voice. The other men arose.

"You can take the call here," the doctor indicated his extension telephone on the desk.

Colt raised the receiver to his ear. "This is Colt, Flynn. Nothing gone wrong, I hope . . ." His voice was strained. There was a pause.

"When?" Another seemingly interminable pause.

"Yes . . . yes . . . she got off at Springfield?"

You're positive . . . ? Oh, she didn't get off? Disappeared? Not in the train? Where's your man now? Yes, I believe there is danger. I'll join you as fast as I can." Colt banged the receiver on the hook as Jimmy clutched his arm. "What is it?" he shouted.

"Suzanne's got away. When the Inspector went to the house she was gone. They traced her to the Montreal Express, and wired her description to the Springfield police. They report she was not on the train when it arrived in Springfield . . ."

"A disguise," said the doctor.

"Of course. Can you wire your man? We've got to get there somehow, Jimmy! But in the meantime, we must warn them that she's coming."

"Do you think she means to kill Dorcas?" asked Jimmy.

"I don't know . . . You see, Jimmy, Suzanne doesn't know we have proof against her. She doesn't know about Nurse Brown's letter. She may think that Dorcas will turn against her in a trial. She may have decided that if Dorcas commits suicide it will be a safer course. There wouldn't be further investigation if the guilt was admitted by suicide, you see . . ."

"It's hell standing here talking about it. Let's DO something?" Jimmy clenched his hands.

"If you can get an aeroplane," suggested the doctor.

"Just the thing! And there's no time to lose!" Colt caught up the suggestion. "Come on, Jimmy! I must see Flynn first to get full details and a warrant that we can use in Maine . . ."

"Wait a minute," the Doctor sat at his desk and wrote something on a slip of paper. "Here's the address with directions how to get there. Good luck to you. I wish I could come with you. Be good to Dorcas . . ." The doctor's voice betrayed his apprehension.

Jimmy wrung his hand.

"When will Suzanne get there?" asked Colt.

"Late to-night. Unless she arranges ahead to be met, she'll have to wait until morning to reach the cottage."

"Then we have twenty to twenty-four hours."

"But unless your pilot knows the lay of the land he'll have trouble landing in that forest-lake district . . ." The doctor tried to conceal his fear. "Anyhow, Martin will do his best," he added more encouragingly. "But I can't wire. You'll get there long before a wire would be delivered. It's very isolated. I've kept it for that reason."

Doctor Scofield watched the departing figures with an expression of anxiety.

SUNDAY
OCTOBER TWENTY-EIGHTH

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LOGAN, pilot of the Curtis Robin biplane, Jimmy and Colt reached Portland on the same night. But it was not until daylight of Sunday that they took off from the broad field on the outskirts of the Maine town. Logan had plotted his flight as accurately as one could on the information furnished them by Dr. Scofield. Every time Jimmy, who was anxiously watching the earth, spied a lake, his heart gave a jump. But after many disappointments an exclamation from Colt, who sat at his side, told him that they were at last nearing the cottage.

Had Suzanne reached there yet? That was the burning question in their minds.

They began to descend, going round and round, as the pilot searched among the thick woods for a spot large enough to land. They came lower and lower, and skimmed quickly across a stubble field, roughly bumping the plane about when the tail began to drag. A turn at the far end and a gradual lessening of speed brought them to a stop.

"Where are we?" Colt was the first to speak.

"About seven miles due north of Lake Moggan . . ."

"If we hurry, we can make it ahead of Suzanne!" exclaimed Jimmy. "It's only eight o'clock!"

Jack Logan climbed out after the others, and looked around. There was no sign of human habitation.

"Guess it's safe to leave the plane here. Anyhow, there isn't much choice. You need me, and I don't want to be missing if there's a fight on . . ."

"Well, let's get going . . ." Jimmy started moving impatiently.

"Which way . . . ?"

"South, I'd advise," said Jack Logan with a half smile. He had been a country boy before he became a pilot, and there'd been a time, too, when he had had to find his way through war-scarred foreign lands as well as sky. He started off beside Jimmy, and Colt fell in step. They soon reached the forest. The trees were thick and there was no path, but without speaking, the three men broke into the dark hushed depths.

It seemed hours. They had walked and walked, yet come to neither opening nor path. It was nine o'clock when they finally struck a path which led almost immediately to a crude log hut in the midst

of a small clearing. The trees were beginning to thin out. They could glimpse the sky ahead instead of only above.

"Better ask our way . . . I'll do it," Colt stepped to the cottage and knocked as he spoke. An old man opened to them.

"How far are we from the east shore of Lake Moggan?"

Jimmy held his breath. It seemed interminable before the old man replied, in a slow drawl:

"Deepends on how fast you can hike, I should say," he surveyed them slowly. "'Bout an hour . . . Time was when I'd allow third o' that 'ud do, but you young fellows is more used to riding than I was . . . your legs ain't as stout . . ."

The three men trudged on again with a renewed vigor. They at last had directions to follow. They didn't speak often. Only to consult the time. Every minute counted. An hour passed and neither the lake nor other human habitation had come in sight. It certainly was desolate country. They were still following the foot-path indicated by the woodsman, Jimmy swearing from exertion and nervousness, when a sudden curve brought the lake into view.

A stiff breeze had arisen and tiny white froth spotted the deep blue waters. Colt's eyes narrowed. He didn't want Jimmy to guess his fears.

But he knew that a desperate woman would stop at nothing.

"Not much of a morning for a row," said the pilot, as he pointed to a tiny speck, the only sign of life on the lake.

"Fishing, probably," returned Colt, as they plunged downward through more trees and undergrowth which at times almost hid the narrow footpath.

It was twelve minutes after ten by the pilot's watch when they struck the shore of the lake. They knew that they were not more than a mile from the Scofield place. A path ran along the rocky shore, and another led inland among the trees. Colt insisted on taking the inner one.

"We mustn't risk being seen . . ."

"Lot of difference that will make, if we're too late . . ." Jimmy was exasperated and worried.

They walked in Indian file, silently.

Suddenly, before they realized that they had reached a human habitation, a broad-shouldered, sun-tanned man, stepped in their path.

"Private property," he stated truculently. "You can't come through here." He was eying them with suspicion.

"Good morning, Martin," Colt's suave voice contrasted strangely with the other. "I'm glad to see you're on the job, just as the doctor said . . ."

"If you know so much about the doctor, you know he doesn't want any visitors here." The heavy legs spread a bit. It was apparent that Martin did not intend to let anyone pass.

"At least this is encouraging, Jimmy," Colt observed in an aside to his companion. "I don't believe that even our beauteous Suzanne could vamp this gentleman . . ."

"What's that you're saying? You've got nothing to do with the young women I have here!" Martin's small eyes gleamed unpleasantly.

"But we hope to have a lot to do with them soon," replied Colt pleasantly. "We came a long distance just to call on your charming charge. You see this gentleman is her husband . . ." He indicated the fuming Jimmy.

"Yeh, and I suppose you're her father, and this feller's her uncle or perhaps her dear brother," Martin grunted. "If you've come a long way, my advice is you'd better be starting back so's to git home before dark. We don't want no relations here . . ." His hand had strayed with deliberation to his pocket.

Colt was rather enjoying Jimmy's wrath and discomfiture, but when he saw what lengths Martin was prepared to go, he judged it was time to call a halt.

"Come, man," he spoke sternly. "Don't try any

nonsense! We're officers of the law. We've come in search of a murderer." He showed his credentials and roughly explained their mission.

Martin's face had undergone many changes, but when the brief recital was finished, the uppermost was consternation and fear.

"Oh, come on. I want to see Dorcas. I won't feel sure everything is all right until . . ."

"I've been a damned fool," Martin interrupted him, his voice fierce and quick. "Mrs. Ribbelsdale arrived about an hour ago. I know her by sight. I let her in. Thought it all right. Her own sister, you know . . ."

"She's here now? With Dorcas?" A look of horror came into Colt's eyes.

"They're out on the lake . . . took a row in the skiff . . . seemed friendly enough . . . Miss Dorcas said nothing to me . . ." Martin was trying hard to find excuses for himself.

"On the lake! My God! Get me a boat. Quick!" Jimmy seized Martin's arm and shook it.

"I wouldn't do that," Colt was thinking rapidly. "She'd do something before you could reach them . . ."

"Dorcas can swim like a fish!" Jimmy was frantic.

"Then probably Suzanne can too . . . And there are other ways . . ."

"Don't!" Jimmy spoke sharply. "It's all your damn foolishness, Martin."

Martin had been doing some thinking on his own, and he now spoke.

"I don't think she's likely to try any monkey-shines out on the lake. They honestly seemed the best of friends. Perhaps she's just trying to test her or something. From what you tell me, she can't know anyone suspects her yet . . ."

He had started through the property and was leading them past the rambling house of logs as he spoke. A girl whom Colt recognized as the Ribbelsdale maid stared inquisitively at them as they passed the kitchen windows. He could smell savory cooking odors. Everything was quiet, peaceful. Their fears seemed absurdly out of place.

"Keep back, behind those bushes!" Martin was cautioning. "They turned toward home. You don't want them to see you till they've landed, you know."

All eyes were concentrated on the tiny speck which was gradually growing larger. Two figures could be made out, one sitting in the stern and one rowing.

"That'll be Miss Dorcas rowing," remarked Martin.

"Dorcas . . . ? Then she went quite will-

ingly . . . ?” Jimmy frowned. It could be seen that he was puzzled.

“She seemed pleased to see her sister. That’s why I figured it’d be all right.”

They crouched behind the thick bushes and for a time were silent. Colt was wondering at what Martin had told them. But common sense gave him the correct solution. He decided that Dorcas was in fear, not primarily of death at the hands of her sister, but she acted the part to keep Suzanne from any idea that she suspected her. As long as Suzanne thought her innocent of any suspicion against her, she was as useful a tool alive as dead.

As the skiff came nearer, they could see that Martin had been right. Dorcas was rowing. And did Jimmy imagine it, or was she rowing with rapidity, glad to be reaching the haven of Martin’s protection?

They were about a hundred rods from the dock. Jimmy was protesting:

“I don’t like it,” he said in a whisper. “It’s time we show ourselves. She won’t dare try anything if she knows we’re here. What’s the sense in just going for a pleasure row? I know she’s up to something, and I . . . I . . .”

“Sh!” cautioned Martin, roughly.

“For all Suzanne knows,” whispered Colt, “she’s

got plenty of time to waste. I think I've got her psychology. She's taking an infinite joy in this ride, if I know my lady. Joy in the fear she knows Dorcas is experiencing . . . Cat and mouse idea, Jimmy, old chap . . ."

"And you expect me to hide here and let her . . ." In his excitement Jimmy raised his voice and started to his feet.

Martin turned fiercely toward him. The skiff was near enough for sound to carry. And moreover Jimmy's head had been in full view until Logan jerked him to the ground.

But seemingly neither of the occupants of the skiff had heard. With easy rhythm they continued their approach to the dock near which the men were concealed.

It was quiet, almost eerie. The breeze which had been strong half an hour ago, was lessening; the lap, lap of the water against the rocky shore was gentle and soothing, and the splashing of the light oars was the only human sound.

None of the men knew quite how it happened. Suzanne had risen abruptly and with rapid uneven steps, reached Dorcas, who had stopped rowing. The oars dangled in their locks while Suzanne grasped Dorcas's hand and, with a cry, appeared to try to wrest from her some object she was putting in her mouth. Dorcas's back was turned to

the men and it all happened with such lightning speed, nothing stood out clearly afterwards. The light skiff, which had rocked at the motion of Suzanne's approach, now completely overturned. A scream, a big splash, and the girls were in the water struggling in each other's arms; and Jimmy with coat and boots thrown off was swimming for them, closely followed by the pilot. Colt had started too, but now restrained himself and gave some curt orders to Martin who raced to the house.

Jimmy, breathless and cold with fear, swam nearer and nearer to the girls. Once they disappeared, and his heart sank. Then he glimpsed just below the crystal-clear surface of the lake the wild dark flowing hair of his young wife, her white determined face upturned. Suzanne's hands were on her neck, pulling, pulling . . . Jimmy made a final desperate spurt forward and grabbed Suzanne by the hair, and pulled her head under. Hands, feet and hair were inextricably mixed. Jimmy was pulled under. He thought for an instant that he was drowning. Then he found himself free with Dorcas lying limp and still in his arms. He turned from the struggling forms at his side, and swam slowly but surely toward the shore, clasping his wife to him, and silently praying. Funny, he thought absently, as his arms held tight the dear form and his feet struck out

with tired effort, funny how one prayed at such moments.

Colt and Martin were at the end of the pier. Jimmy felt himself and his burden being lifted up onto the dry planks. He tried to speak, but couldn't. He lost consciousness, while Martin worked over his apparently lifeless charge. The splashing in the lake had ceased. Jack Logan was swimming in, dragging Suzanne with him.

Jimmy opened his eyes. "Is she safe . . . ?" he murmured, and tried to rise.

Colt had been rubbing Dorcas's hands, while his troubled mind played with the possibility of poison. She lay so pallid, so still, like the other victims of Suzanne's cunning. But slowly she became conscious and when Jimmy struggled to her side and smoothed the wet unkempt hair from her white forehead, the eyes fluttered, and a faint "Jimmy . . . dear . . ." came from the blue lips.

"She's coming around all right . . . don't worry . . ." Martin was consoling the sobbing Jimmy, when Jack Logan grasped Colt's hand and together they pulled Suzanne to the dock.

Martin picked Dorcas up in his arms and carried her to the house, Jimmy at his side. The work of resuscitation began anew. But Suzanne did not respond. She lay limp and quiet, a proud

smile of scorn twisting the open mouth. Her eyes stared cold and glassily up at them. Colt shivered. It might so easily have been Dorcas instead of Suzanne. Logan was trying valiantly to restore life; but it was not to be.

"She's beat us, Colt. The lady's dead," he announced grimly as he desisted from his efforts.

"Perhaps it's better so . . ." The Assistant District Attorney was thinking of the two children who must live in the shadow of the tragedy. "She doesn't deserve to get off so easily and Pulver will never stop telling me how I've bungled it," he smiled with wry gayety, "but I'll confide in you, Logan, I'm a tender-hearted chicken . . ."

"Rot!" retorted the pilot with a friendly grin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DORCAS lay wrapped in a warm blanket; her head resting on Jimmy's shoulder. They were alone. Colt had gone to the village with Jack Logan. There were innumerable details for him to clear up before nightfall. A telegram had to be sent to Flynn, arrangements had to be made to return Suzanne's body to Dartford, a wire to Doctor Scofield who, he felt certain, was anxious to hear the outcome.

"Don't try to tell me, dear, if it tires you," Jimmy was saying softly.

"It doesn't . . . I'll feel better if I do tell you . . . from the beginning." She continued, reflectively. "I think I first suspected . . . when Mother Ribbelsdale died. I knew Suzanne hated me, because of David, and later because of you. . . ." A warm rich color mounted to her pale forehead. "But I had nothing to go on. I couldn't be sure I wasn't doing her a terrible injustice. Peter acted so queerly . . . I never really believed he was guilty, but I felt there was something there that I didn't understand. The

whole house seemed haunted. I was often frightened, more frightened than I wanted you to know. You see, dear, I was afraid . . . if anyone knew about us . . . that I had come in late that night . . . they would know I must have seen David . . . and they'd never believe he was dead then . . . they'd think I did it . . .” Her eyes were wet, but she smiled gallantly. “It sounds silly now, as if I weren't brave at all, but then it was so real . . . I could almost hear the judge's voice sentencing me . . .”

“Don't, sweetheart . . . don't think about it all!” He kissed her tenderly. “We'll go away and forget it all . . .”

“Not without David's darling babies!” Dorcas spoke with more spirit. “I pitied David and I think I loved him, too, Jimmy. Not in the way I love you, but I knew he was terribly unhappy. . . . At first when he died, I thought there might have been a real Cynthia . . . then I felt I'd misjudged Suzanne. It seemed so senseless to write all those letters, and take all that trouble for nothing . . . or just to plague poor old David . . .”

“Colt thinks David never saw the letters . . . she wrote them and hid them in his desk . . . he died without hearing of the mysterious Cynthia . . . they were an alibi.”

“Then why did she try to put the blame on

me . . . ?” A puzzled frown wrinkled her nose.

Jimmy blushed uncomfortably.

“I guess that was my fault . . .” he stammered with embarrassment. “She seemed to have thought I . . . that is I loved . . . that is . . .”

“You adorable idiot! I knew she was crazy about you . . . anyone could see it. That’s why I insisted we get married secretly. I believe I was afraid of her.”

“I can’t believe it all yet. It seems so unreasonable.” Jimmy shook his head. “She must have been crazy . . . You don’t think she really killed Dave because she thought I——”

Dorcas nodded soberly. “But it wasn’t your fault. Suzanne was always restless, ever since I can remember her. Unless she was the center of attraction she was unhappy. She was badly spoiled, and because she had everything she wanted she never appreciated anything. She used to get bored . . . and be so moody, I was sometimes frightened when we were just youngsters.”

“But with a fine man like David and everything money could buy, and such lovely children! She must have been mad, Dorcas. People don’t commit murder for nothing!”

“But my darling Jimmy, she didn’t do it for nothing . . .”

Again Jimmy reddened. “But Mrs. Ribbels-

dale, and Peter . . . she killed Peter, too, didn't she? You never really thought it was suicide, did you?"

Dorcas shook her head sadly. "I think I knew . . . that was when I began to be terribly afraid. I was so thankful when dear old Dr. Scofield sent me away up here. I think he had suspected her for a long time. I felt so safe when I got here. It only made me sad to think of Peter . . . I loved Peter so much . . . and he'd been so brave. He defied her, I think . . . and she killed him to save herself. Suzanne didn't really kill wantonly . . . after she'd done David, she couldn't stop. You see, she was afraid they'd give her away . . . Mother Ribbelsdale and Peter, I mean. She was going to kill me too, for the same reason. She thought I suspected her . . . Oh, it was awful, Jimmy, when she walked in this morning. I'd been feeling so happy and safe. I'd slept for the first time in days. I was feeling so care-free . . . I'd just come down to breakfast, when she walked in, seemingly so serene, yet watching every move. And I knew then that she intended to kill me if I appeared the least suspicious of her. I acted a part, as I never acted before. But I didn't dare eat. I thought I might go to sleep if I did . . ."

She shuddered. "It was then I saw that hard determined light in her eyes. When I didn't care

for my breakfast . . . She just laughed lightly, but what a world of torment there was in that laugh. Oh, Jimmy, I thought I'd never see you again . . . and she'd make even you think I was the murderess . . . that's what she'd been trying to do . . . make me seem guilty. She thought that would make you hate me, and then you'd turn to her!"

"Don't get so excited, sweetheart, it's all over now. Let's forget all that, and think only of the future . . ."

Jimmy slipped to the couch by her side, and clasped her in his arms. "Just lean against me, and forget . . ."

"I'm afraid we're *de trop*, Logan," a bantering voice broke in on the silence in which the reunited pair were sitting.

Jimmy jumped hastily to his feet and smiled. "Not at all! If you run away every time I kiss my wife, you'll be on the jump pretty steadily!"

"I hope you feel much better," Colt smiled, going to Dorcas's side and looking down at her pale face and feverish eyes.

"I'm all right . . . thanks to you three. I was just telling Jimmy how frightened I'd been when Suzanne came. Martin didn't know. Why should he? And I simply didn't dare try to tell him. She watched every move I made. She followed

every step. Oh, she said nothing . . . except that she was glad I'd gotten away, that I'd escaped arrest. I knew that as long as she thought she could put the guilt on me, I was safe from her . . . but I was afraid I might be found guilty. I knew she was horribly clever. She'd always been so much cleverer than I, ever since we were children. . . ."

"I don't see why you went out in a boat with her. You were reasonably safe as long as you stuck close to Martin. . . ." Colt sat down and took out a cigar. Logan sat respectfully in the background.

"Everything she said seemed to have a veiled threat. I didn't dare oppose her. I can swim much better than she, and I really felt safer out there in the open. Here she kept offering me food . . . and sort of sneering when I didn't eat. She said it was unnatural not to be hungry in these woods. I had to say I was nervous about being arrested. We discussed my chances of getting off, just as if I was actually the murderess. . . ." She bit her lip, but went on steadily. "It was pretty awful. She accused me of killing David because he wouldn't leave her . . . And she said the Inspector knew I had come home late and had been alone with David last of anyone . . . and she said my pretended marriage was a lie, that

the Inspector had told her so . . . and that only I had the opportunity to kill Mother Ribbelsdale . . . and that I was alone with Peter. Oh—it was diabolically clever, I'll admit. There was only my word against all that evidence. That was when we were rowing about. She suggested then, that if I committed suicide or jumped in the lake or something . . . that it would be easier than to be . . . hanged . . .

“I don't know what possessed me. I'd been so careful not to let her think I suspected her. But suddenly I blurted out that I knew she was guilty, and that I could prove it. She laughed. She was so sure of herself. She goaded me on, taunting and sneering. I never saw Suzanne like that before. She was like a different person. I guess my face showed my horror. Anyhow, she kept on telling me about my coming arrest and trial, drawing the most lurid pictures of my torture, and offering me suicide as a way of escape. Then I laughed in her face. I think I suddenly went mad too. I told her about Peter's letter . . . what he had said! She just laughed . . . said of course I was his only sister. That was the chief evidence against me. I crumpled up then. I didn't care about anything any more. It was all so fantastic; I felt caught. She was so arrogant, so gay. I wanted to tip the boat over then. But it would

have meant killing her too, and frightened as I was I couldn't do that . . .

"Then I thought I heard Jimmy's voice. My heart gave such a jump! Suzanne must have heard something too, or seen something. Because the most ghastly smile spread over her face . . ." Dorcas shut her eyes at the memory. "Then she jumped toward me . . . screamed at me not to swallow that poison . . . I hadn't anything in my hand. I thought for an instant she had gone crazy. Then I saw a needle in her hand, and madness in her face. She grasped me with her left hand. I had only a second to decide. I threw all my weight on one side, and deliberately tipped the boat over . . .

"You all know about the rest better than I do. I fought her off again and again. She still tried to get that needle into my arm. But I caught both her wrists. I think she dropped the needle. She flung loose from me, and clung about my neck. She was trying to strangle me . . . I don't remember any more . . . until I lay by Jimmy on the pier . . ."

"You need a rest," Colt's voice was kind but determined. "If you will promise to try to sleep, I'll leave your husband with you. But you must get a complete rest. Logan and I will attend to everything. Martin has been a trump. You just

sleep. And when you're rested and have eaten a good dinner, I'll piece all the bits together for you. I must get off to-night. We want to reach Portland before dark. But before I go, I'll tell you what I can. Then I want you, Jimmy, to take your wife away . . . to the Congo or Alaska or Tibet, and keep her there until she recovers. Now don't interrupt . . . I know you're thinking of those babies. Mademoiselle Monot is an old pal of mine, and I'll have her bring them down to my place. There's room enough for an orphan asylum there and I'll love having them. Then when you return I'll hand them over."

Jimmy grasped Colt's hand in a tight grip. He couldn't find words. When Colt turned back as he closed the door softly, he saw Dorcas lying against her husband's broad shoulder, her eyes peacefully shut.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BUT after all it was not Dorcas and Jimmy to whom Colt was to relate the details of the tragedy, but to Inspector Flynn. When he came back to the living room an hour before his departure, Dorcas had been sleeping so peacefully that he hadn't the heart to disturb her. She looked like a weary child; her sweet face slightly flushed with sleep. Jimmy gently disengaged the hand he had been clasping, and tiptoed to the hall to take leave of Logan and Colt. They exchanged best wishes, and Colt and Logan, after hearty handclasps for Martin, trudged back to the waiting plane. Logan, with the uncanny instinct of the born adventurer, had managed to refill her and she was in readiness for their short flight to Portland, where they planned to spend the night. It was dusk when they arrived, and they were finishing their last cigar before going to bed when Inspector Flynn strolled casually into the Inn lounge. At Colt's gasp of astonishment, the Inspector chuckled.

"Pulver's back——"

"Good Lord!"

"Forewarned's forearmed!" The Inspector turned to the pilot. "Hello, Logan!" he said, then to Colt: "Sure, Pulver got wind of this Ribbelsdale business. It's made a big enough smell to reach every corner of the globe. When you left Dartford, the papers just let loose. Old Pulver was purple and panting when I ran into him . . ."

"Good Lord . . ."

"That was before Dartford got wise to the climax . . ." Flynn grinned widely. "Now you're the hero of the hour, and old Pulver's madder than he would have been if you'd fumbled it. Inscrutabilities of human nature, as you'd say, Colt. Pulver calls it beginner's luck, but he'll eat out of your hand, see if he don't!" He seated himself before the fire and passed around a package of cigarettes. "I came along to attend to the corpse, and, incidentally," he grinned, "I want to hear your side of the story. Fire away . . ."

Colt lay back in the big leather chair and smiled contentedly. He had something of the inner satisfaction of a child who has taken its first steps successfully; he had stumbled, but he hadn't fallen down.

"Of course, Flynn, we aren't either of us up to the Sherlock Holmes brand. I don't mind admitting it here, among friends. I couldn't make deduction if I tried, and I wouldn't if I could.

Your straightforward hack work has its points. But my method of observing and probing didn't turn out such bad results. The piano had had something set on it . . . most probably the stuff that killed Ribbelsdale. I got a kick out of my perspicuity! That's the only advantage my feeble powers of observation have . . . No, we'll have to agree that my medium is in more elusive matters, on a spiritual plane, as it were . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake, Colt——"

"As you will," Colt grinned, "I'll spin my yarn and just interrupt if you are unable to comprehend . . ." He put the tips of his fingers together and commenced:

"Suzanne Wilder was the family pet. Ten years before she should she had run the gamut of normal emotions. All her desires were instantly fulfilled. She was beginning to be bored with normal pleasures, when she met David Ribbelsdale. His passion pleased her vanity; impulsively she married him, only to discover that the life of a society matron, even the leading society matron in Dartford, was not all she had anticipated. She steeped herself in unhealthy post-war literature. Then one day it occurred to her that she was a bit out of the thrills of the time; other young girls engineered hold-ups, did breath-taking stunts in aeroplanes. Our Suzanne felt thwarted. Her hus-

band thought she was a plaything, a choice possession, a machine to produce his offspring, a mistress for his pleasure. Well, she'd show him! So she bought some arsenic to kill rats and used it on her husband, in small doses, just to get a kick out of it, with no idea of killing him, mind!"

"But what the devil!" Flynn grunted. "She must have been coo-coo."

"She had jaded tastes, Flynn. You wouldn't understand, but she was bored; she felt trapped, caught in a morass of rich stupidity. It was harmless and amusing to feel one's power. When David felt sick, she knew what caused it. Sometimes, she would go off on a spree and give him really large doses, but his constitution fortunately resisted them. It was sometimes during this amusing pastime that she came to realize that in the event of a slip in her calculations, she might find herself being tried for murder. That would be one too many thrills even for her jaded tastes, so Suzanne got a 'bright' idea. She commenced to write those Cynthia letters. Cynthia would be the guilty person; Suzanne would be the wronged wife and hence safe. You must admit, Flynn, those letters had us all stumped for a time. I couldn't fit them in anywhere. If she'd only been less meticulous in the handwriting; if she'd made it temperamental to fit her imaginary Cynthia she

might have gotten by with us. The real danger from the first lay at home, not with the police, and she was clever enough to know it."

"But why did she finally kill Ribbelsdale? Was it an accident, or shouldn't I ask?" It was Logan who now spoke.

"Haven't you tumbled to that, Logan?" Flynn exclaimed. "She wanted her sister's man!"

"I believe that was the motive," Colt admitted. "She'd been jealous of Dorcas from the first. David liked his young sister-in-law far too well to suit Suzanne. And then just as Suzanne turned her attention to Jimmy, Dorcas seemed to have the inside track there, too. She was a bit helpless, being married, and Jimmy was rather old-fashioned, with pre-war ideas of decency. Our lady felt more thwarted than ever. She couldn't bear to see the kid sister win out there. Jimmy was a new thrill, and Suzanne had to have thrills. To make Jimmy love her became even more fascinating a game than poisoning David. That must have been a hectic household for a year or more. Dr. Scofield had his suspicions, but he was too discreet. After all, there's really nothing one could have done. Suzanne went on writing letters from Cynthia which she herself received from the postman and opened before concealing them in the secret drawer. David knew nothing of them . . .

or if he did, he kept the knowledge to himself. She had her second child, and her pregnancy gave Dorcas an unfair advantage. It also gave Suzanne a new idea. She had had twilight-sleep. She learned something of the drug which worked so marvelously. Hyoscine, with its accompanying conditions of analgesia and amnesia. Much more fun than arsenic! She'd become something of a sybarite, you see . . ."

Colt paused, but neither of his companions spoke. It was all so fantastic.

"So she stole Dr. Scofield's hyoscine and chirruped with glee at her smartness. How she was outwitting everyone, even the doctor! But she had to wait her time. David, you see, had his own suspicions about his wife, but he would have died rather than brand the mother of his children. He did die and we shall never know whether unwittingly or deliberately. I myself think that Suzanne pulled off some clever stunt that last night whereby David thought Dorcas had left a 'night-cap' for him. She knew Dorcas was away, and even then I think the idea of connecting Dorcas with the unknown Cynthia had entered her mind. You see Dorcas as well as David was in her way . . ."

"I've run into some dirty business in my time, but . . ." Flynn shook his head.

"Quite . . ." Colt took out another cigar and

lit it. "I think David would have been the only victim, if things had gone Suzanne's way, but they didn't. First, Jimmy insisted on getting me in on it, and she above all wanted to please Jimmy. I don't think we bothered her much, anyhow. It was old Mrs. Ribbelsdale who was troubling Suzanne's serenity. Dr. Scofield told me that the old lady had been suspicious of her daughter-in-law for over a year . . . back in the arsenic days, and David's death couldn't have been wholly unexpected by her. I don't think Suzanne wanted to kill when she started. Jimmy was her passion of the moment. But a zest for killing undoubtedly came with her success. And it piled up trouble for Dorcas. So old Mrs. Ribbelsdale went to join her son.

"And here is where Peter comes in: the boy must have suspected Dorcas at first. He undoubtedly saw her creep in that night, just as Mademoiselle Monot saw her. She and Jimmy had been secretly married . . . in New York, Flynn, not to deceive you, but Suzanne. Poor Peter was frantic. He loved Dorcas with all his young idealism. He heard Suzanne and old Mrs. Ribbelsdale have it out, as his letter proves. He must then have known Suzanne was guilty, and about then with her uncanny intuition, Suzanne knew that Peter knew. Another pretty kettle of fish, you see. But I think

Suzanne suffered some qualms about killing her own flesh and blood. She certainly let him live too long for her own safety. We had let her know that we suspected the authenticity of the Cynthia letters. She must connect them with Dorcas by hook or crook. And she believed that Dorcas was Jimmy's wife. How she must have hated her. Unless this rival was crushed all her risks would be for naught. Dorcas must go and better Peter too! After all, they were only half-brother and sister.

"She must have felt a wave of satisfaction when you tumbled for the guilt of Dorcas. But she hadn't foreseen that Jimmy would be involved. That troubled her. She was safe now, and Jimmy must be safe, too. If he owed his safety to her, he might begin to feel for her the passion she wanted. With Dorcas eliminated, there was always the chance. And there had been a time when Jimmy was perilously near betraying his friend in desire if not in act. Suzanne couldn't forget that. She wanted Jimmy. She was clever, consummately clever, but when you once suspected her, there were lots of little ways in which she gave herself away. That New Haven letter she sent herself from Cynthia was overstepping herself. But no one tumbled to it. She must have had a jolly feeling that she was dealing with a

pack of fools; even when she made mistakes, she got away with them. She was at the height of her confidence, when we came to the house and found Dorcas and the servants gone. That gave her a nasty turn. It meant that Dorcas *knew*, and intended to stand out against her. Her chances were still good . . . you so obviously suspected Dorcas, but still . . .”

“There was just as much sense in suspecting one as the other, until that letter came from Nurse Brown,” Flynn defended himself.

“Exactly . . . And Suzanne died without knowing that she had betrayed herself by the very letters which were to protect her. I doubt if a jury would have convicted either of those girls on the evidence in Peter’s letter. And we had precious little else; Dorcas’s finger prints on Peter’s glass, her soiled shoes of the size of Cynthia’s and such things, but no real motive. Suzanne probably counted on proving that Dorcas had been David’s mistress and that she killed him to conceal their relation from Jimmy, but that would hardly account for Peter. A brother wouldn’t be likely to denounce his sister. No, Suzanne was beginning to have unpleasant misgivings as to where a trial would land them. But how she found out Dorcas’s whereabouts and how she escaped your guard, I

can't imagine . . .” Colt raised his eyebrows and smiled indolently.

“And I'll never know,” was the Inspector's dolorous admission. “Perhaps it was that uncanny sixth sense . . . perhaps Dorcas left something behind, an address or something . . . we'll never know . . .”

“But even so, Flynn, your men should have watched her . . .”

“Remember they thought they were there to *protect* her, not to guard her . . .”

“That's just where she got around Martin, too. He knew he was to protect Dorcas, but hardly thought it was her own sister who threatened her. We had to be circumspect, but in our very effort to get around her we nearly played into her hands . . .”

“It's those kids I'm sorry for,” Logan who so rarely spoke now said. “Dartford is a small place when it comes to family skeletons.”

“That's what I'd been coming to,” Colt turned to the Inspector. “Don't you think, Inspector, your conscience would allow you to suppress what I've told you about Suzanne's earlier amusements with David and arsenic and call it a case of temporary insanity brought on by some irregularity of her last confinement? I think I could get Scofield to

certify it, and it would let those youngsters out of any hereditary taint, and in a way even excuse their mother. Insanity is a visitation from the Almighty, you know, not a devilish concoction of a jaded selfish woman. I've thought a lot about those youngsters. David was so proud of his young son. At the Club he always talked of him. If you could agree to insanity, Inspector . . ."

"Agree! Hell, man, if you talked all night about jaded tastes, thwarted thrills, and all that bunk, I'd never believe she was anything but plain 'nuts'!" answered Inspector Flynn vehemently.

Rodney Colt reached over and clasped Flynn's hand. The Inspector's mouth gaped.

THE END



The Editors of the Mystery League in the following pages from the next Selection, introduce an author hitherto unpublished in America, altho well-known in England for his thrilling stories of mystery and detection.

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JACK O' LANTERN

CHAPTER ONE

THEY had opened the road along Bircher's Dock, and the customary untidiness of the place was made even worse by unsightly piles of dripping earth, mud-bespattered lengths of drain-pipe, and a miscellaneous assemblage of engineering gear, including a crane and hideous donkey-engine. To add to the impression of Inferno, a dank mist was invading the foreshore from the river, saturating everything with moisture. The night-watchman, in his timber cubby-hole, smoked a pipe of foul tobacco and watched with an anxious eye an array of crackling chestnuts reposing in the pan of a capacious shovel which lay across a coke fire.

He was a philosophic individual, which in the circumstances was fortunate, for Bircher's Dock at close upon midnight was as uninviting a spot as the human mind could conceive. All around were ghostly shapes, and diffused lights. The crane, but dimly visible in the encompassing mist, looked

like some nameless creature from a nether world, and at intervals came eerie hoots from the river, where ships were endeavouring to make a safe passage to sea. The guardian of the coke fire and the roasting chestnuts took the shovel in both hands and gave it a vigorous shake.

“Help! He——!”

The shovel and its contents fell into the mud, and the night-watchman felt his hair rising vertically, as the cry was followed by a splash. He gasped with horror, dived round the hut and caught a glimpse of a shadowy form making away from the water's edge. He possessed a police whistle, and he blew it with all the force of his healthy lungs. Then he ran across piles of litter to the spot whence the cry had come. He stared into the muddy water, but saw nothing but garbage. A few minutes later a light approached him through the mist.

“Hal-lo!”

Behind the light was the welcome glistening cape of a constable, and a dripping helmet.

“Did you whistle?”

“Yus. There was a yell and a splash—near here. Someone went into the river. It's murder——”

“Eh?”

“I saw him—him wot did it—running away—

jest vanished into the fog. . . . Look! There's something—yonder!”

The mist had opened suddenly and disclosed a body—drifting slowly down stream. A little hiss left the constable's lips. He blew his whistle and then looked about him.

“Is there a boat near?”

“Aye. I'll show you. Mind that trench!”

Gasping, they reached a flight of stone steps, below which a small boat was moored. They entered it, and the night-watchman took the oars while the constable directed the ray of his electric lamp on the surface of the stream.

“It was that way—that way!”

A few minutes of anxious searching followed, and then the ray of the lamp fell on a human form, almost completely submerged.

“Pull your left! A-h!”

“Got—him?”

“Aye—lend a hand. He's a pretty good lump.”

The victim was got aboard. It was a man of about fifty, well-dressed and of good physique. The constable put his hand to the heart, and when he removed it it was stained crimson. The night-watchman's eyes bulged.

“O-oh!” he gasped. “Stabbed!”

“Aye, murder it is. He's dead all right. Get ashore quickly.”

By the time they reached the quay a second policeman was on the spot. They took the murdered man to the night-watchman's hut and laid him on a tarpaulin sheet. Another attempt was made to revive him, but it was proved beyond all doubt that he was beyond human aid. The second constable shook the wet off his helmet.

"He's a goner," he said. "Nasty bit o' work."

"Gentleman, too! Face seems a bit familiar. Better phone the office, Jim. Tell 'em to send along the ambulance."

The night-watchman, shocked by his first experience of brutal crime, kept nodding his head. He watched the remaining constable go through the dead man's pockets, but was too horrified to take much interest in that proceeding.

"Phew!" said the constable. "There's going to be a hell of a noise over this. He's Sir Randolph Cantler!"

"Eh?"

"Famous K.C. I thought I knew his face. My word, there will be a song. . . . Now then, this man that you saw—what was he like?"

"I only just got a glimpse of him afore he disappeared into the fog. Seemed to be fairly tall, longish coat, soft hat—big brim. He went off like a cat. Blimey, my inside feels upside down!"

The constable made some notes in his pocket-

book, took the night-watchman's name and address, and then left the hut with a view to finding footprints, but where the tragedy had presumably taken place there was a stretch of asphalt, and his mission was vain. Beyond the quay were many side-streets. Pursuit was out of the question—on such a night. He went back to the corpse, and waited for his comrade to return.

"Say," said the night-watchman, "do you think it was that fellow they're after—Jack o' Lantern?"

"It can be anyone. It might be you."

"Eh! What! 'Ere, you be careful——!"

Later came the ambulance, and the remains of the reputable and highly-respected Sir Randolph Cantler were removed. The night-watchman sat and shivered, and let his chestnuts lie in the mud at his feet.

On the following morning there was a brief—but startling—announcement in the morning Press, and the public waited with all its habitual eagerness for a big thrill. Ultimately fuller details were published, and London's latest murder was discussed by its teeming millions.

At Scotland Yard the police were more than usually worried. Murder of any kind was bad enough, but when the victim was an eminent King's Counsel, a man whose name was in common parlance "a household word," something had to be

done to justify the existence of the C.I.D. But nothing was done, for the simple reason that no clue to the assassin was forthcoming. The puzzling element in the business was Sir Randolph's presence at Bircher's Dock at midnight. His secretary had asserted that Sir Randolph had left home at seven o'clock that evening with the object of dining with a fellow K.C. But the K.C. in question knew nothing of the alleged appointment. The whole thing was a complete mystery.

All the police had to go upon was the night-watchman's very brief description of the man he saw running away—a description which did not carry them very far. That the motive was not robbery was proved by the fact that the dead man had in his possession a considerable sum of money and a valuable gold watch.

A strongly-worded leader article in *The Times* on the urgent need for some new system of criminal detection exasperated the Commissioner and the "Big Four." The Press expected miracles when the days of miracles were over. There was a wholesale round-up of suspicious characters, both in London and in the provinces, and several persons were detained pending further investigation.

About one month after the Cantler murder, Detective-Inspector John Wrench, of the C.I.D.,

made a brilliant capture of a notorious cat-burglar and safe-cracker, known as the "Slasher." Wrench had spent many weary days and nights on the trail of this ingenious scoundrel, but at last patience was rewarded, and Wrench had gone up still higher in the estimation of the authorities. Out of this capture had emerged an interesting fact, and it was in reference to this that Wrench presented himself at the office of the Assistant Commissioner. The latter was out, but Sweeting was present.

Sweeting was a superintendent, and not greatly enamoured of Wrench. He was an exceedingly difficult man to work under, and the friction that existed between himself and Wrench was due entirely to jealousy. The recent capture of the "Slasher" only served to exacerbate feeling, for Sweeting himself had failed utterly to produce any results.

"Hallo, Wrench!" he said. "Qualifying for the Commissioner's job?"

"No, the Home Secretary's," replied Wrench calmly.

"Well, hang on, dear boy. One never knows."

Wrench smiled as he sat down, and Sweeting turned over some papers noisily. It had taken him thirty years to reach his present position, and Wrench had gone three parts of that distance in

less than ten. It was a stupendous achievement, and in Sweeting's eyes intolerable.

"How's our old friend—the 'Slasher'?" he inquired.

"Slightly mopy. He asked me to give you his love."

"The swine! Well, we have got things weighed up for him." He resumed his cynical banter. "You have only to march in Jack o' Lantern, and Scotland Yard is yours. Naturally you are quite optimistic?"

"I'm always optimistic, and a trifle more than usual at this particular moment."

Sweeting raised his eyebrows, but made no response. A few minutes later the Assistant Commissioner entered the room. He nodded at Wrench.

"You want to see me?"

"I have made a discovery, sir, which is a little interesting. This note was found on the 'Slasher.'"

The Chief took the proffered letter, and read it. His eyes lighted up, and he read it aloud:

Usual place. Better leave Kate out of it.

JACK O' LANTERN.

Sweeting started, and the Assistant Commissioner raised his head and looked at Wrench keenly.

"That name again! Curious how it crops up, yet we never seem to get any closer to him. Have you interrogated the 'Slasher' about this?"

"Not yet."

"Where is he now?"

"Outside. I took the liberty of bringing him along."

"Good! Send him in!"

The prisoner was brought in by a sergeant. He was a cadaverous type of man, with projecting teeth and a slight cast in one eye. At the moment he was sullen and morose. He scowled at Wrench and bowed mockingly to Sweeting. The Assistant Commissioner walked up to him and held the letter before his eyes.

"Who sent you that?" he asked.

"Wot?" said the "Slasher" impudently.

"This note. Come, it may be in your interest to give us certain information. What do you know about this man who calls himself Jack o' Lantern?"

The "Slasher's" eyes moved nervously, as if he expected the writer of the note suddenly to appear before him. He hesitated, and then shook his head.

"Nothin'."

"You have seen him?"

"Maybe—maybe, I have."

"How long is it since you saw him last?"

"I can't remember."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know."

"Don't lie. Tell me something about him—and this woman, Kate. Be sensible, and it is possible we may feel inclined to overlook certain charges."

The "Slasher" hesitated again, and for a moment it looked as if he were about to "squeal," but the old fear returned and he shook his head stubbornly. Every possible method of persuasion was resorted to, but all to no purpose. Evidently the "Slasher's" fear of Jack o' Lantern was greater than that of a long imprisonment. Ultimately the Assistant Commissioner waved his hand disgustedly, and the prisoner was led away.

"If that brute would only speak, it would save us a whole lot of trouble and worry," he mused. "You don't know the woman referred to—Kate?"

"There's Kate Spalding," said Wrench. "But to the best of my knowledge she has never been associated with the 'Slasher.' And since she last came out she has been doing honest work—strange as it may sound."

"Well, find this woman somehow. It is possible the 'Slasher' may change his mind when he hears what kind of a sentence he is going to get. But we need another string to pull." He hit the table with his fist. "We've got to get this mysterious Jack o' Lantern, who appears to be responsible for at least three murders."

"Do you include Sir Randolph Cantler?" asked Sweeting.

"It is highly probable. He died from a precisely similar wound to that found on the body of Richard Summers, over three years ago, and Summers lived long enough to breathe the name—or sobriquet—of his murderer. There is a link somewhere. Move heaven and earth, Wrench. We have to justify our existence."

CHAPTER TWO

A FORTNIGHT later the celebrated Judge Wallington sat in his comfortable and well-stocked library at his house near Regent's Park, perusing a work on criminology by Lombroso. He was a homely type of man, and divided his spare time between reading works of an abstruse and scientific nature and the collecting of art treasures. Despite his professional association with murderers, thieves and swindlers, he was inclined to take an optimistic view of life and humanity in general. Yet with all his impartiality he had gained the reputation of being harsh—some said the harshest judge in Europe. But this reputation was not merited, for Wallington in his wide experience of human nature knew when justice could, with prudence, be tempered with mercy, and when it could not.

He was yet young for one holding his eminent position—a little over fifty years of age, and his appearance belied his calling. One would have been more inclined to take him for a simple-minded dreamer than a criminal court judge who

had sent to the gallows more than a score of homicides. At this moment he was completely at ease—his slippered feet resting on a large satin-covered *pouffe*, and his fine head supported by two soft cushions. His gold-rimmed pince-nez were pushed far down his long straight nose, and he held a very fragrant Havana cigar between his fingers.

Sitting immediately opposite him was his guest and friend of long standing—Hugo Michels, a retired judge from the Berlin Central Criminal Court. Michels displayed none of Wallington's comfort-loving propensities. He had chosen deliberately a straight-backed Chippendale chair, and was examining a fine collection of Baxter prints. He was fifteen years older than his confrère—a much heavier type of man, with a square head poised on enormously broad shoulders; big hands and stubby fingers. Wallington put down his book with a sigh.

"You know, my dear Michels," he said, "Lombroso is inclined to become prosy—and rather out of date."

"Quite. This is a splendid collection—almost complete."

"Not bad. I have received many tempting offers for them, but so far I have not succumbed, and——"

There came a light tap on the door, and a girl of about twenty entered. Her light gown, fair hair, and rose complexion gave a relieving note of colour to the somewhat austere room. She came to the Judge with the graceful movements of one in perfect physical health, and laid her white slim fingers on Wallington's arm.

"Sorry to interrupt you, daddy," she said. "But John has just phoned up to say he might be a trifle late, and he hopes you will excuse him. Nali is out, so I took the message myself."

"Thank you, Sonia."

She smiled, and then hesitated for a moment.

"He was awfully mysterious."

"Eh!"

"Well, you see, I didn't know he was coming here to-night."

"I didn't know myself until this afternoon. It is just a little matter of business, my dear. John, not to mention everyone else at the 'Yard,' is devoting his young life to the tracking down of a certain person."

"Oh, you mean Jack o' Lantern?"

"So you know that?"

"Everybody knows that."

"Well, I rather fancy I may be able to shed a little light on the matter. Nothing very brilliant—just a few facts. Why has Nali gone out?"

"I don't know. He just—disappeared."

"He oughtn't to go without asking. Well, never mind. When Wrench comes, remember that his appointment is with *me*."

She smiled as she divined his meaning, and then reprimanded him for spilling cigar ash over the beautiful Persian carpet. He pulled her pink ear playfully as she adjusted the cushions under his head. Michels gave her an interested glance as she went out.

"So she calls you 'daddy'?"

"She loves to call me 'Bunty' or 'Nunks' when no one is near to hear her."

"She is beautiful and charming."

Wallington nodded.

"Alas, I am to lose her soon!" he mused. "The inevitable interloper and smasher of homes—Cupid. It seems but a year since I brought her from India—a mere slip of a girl, and yet it is more than seven. I had to complete the education which poor Pelling so shockingly neglected. But I think I can understand that sin of omission. He was lonely after the death of his wife, and hungered for his little daughter. She went out to him. Horrible job—District Commissioner, stuck away in the Punjab. He went to pieces after his bereavement—survived his wife by four years. Of course I had to take the girl—that had always

been his wish in the event of such a catastrophe. Well, I've never had cause to regret it. She brought something into this house that was never here before she came. I'm afraid it has been a little quiet for her."

"But the Hindu—Nali?"

"He was Pelling's servant and devoted slave. It was Sonia's wish that I should bring him along. The poor devil apparently convinced her that he would cut his throat after she had gone. I succumbed to her blandishments, and it hasn't turned out so badly. He is a kind of butler-cum-valet, and perfect in both vocations."

"And whom is your ward to marry?"







